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THE CASENTINO AND ITS STORY

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GEORGE FRANCIS PARKMAN

(Class of 1844)

OF BOSTON

THE CASENTINO AND ITS STORY

". . . where the Etrurian shades
high over-arched imbower."

"I wonder that thou hast never set thy steps . . . in the Casentino and its confines. . . . Here is the place of the Alverna. . . . Here is the holy hermitage of Camaldoli. . . . Here is the sacred cœnobium of Vallombrosa. . . . Here is the source of the Arno. . . ."

Letter of COUNT ROBERT OF BATTIFOLLE
to PETRARCH.


FONS SARNI



THE CASENTINO AND ITS STORY

BY ELLA NOYES

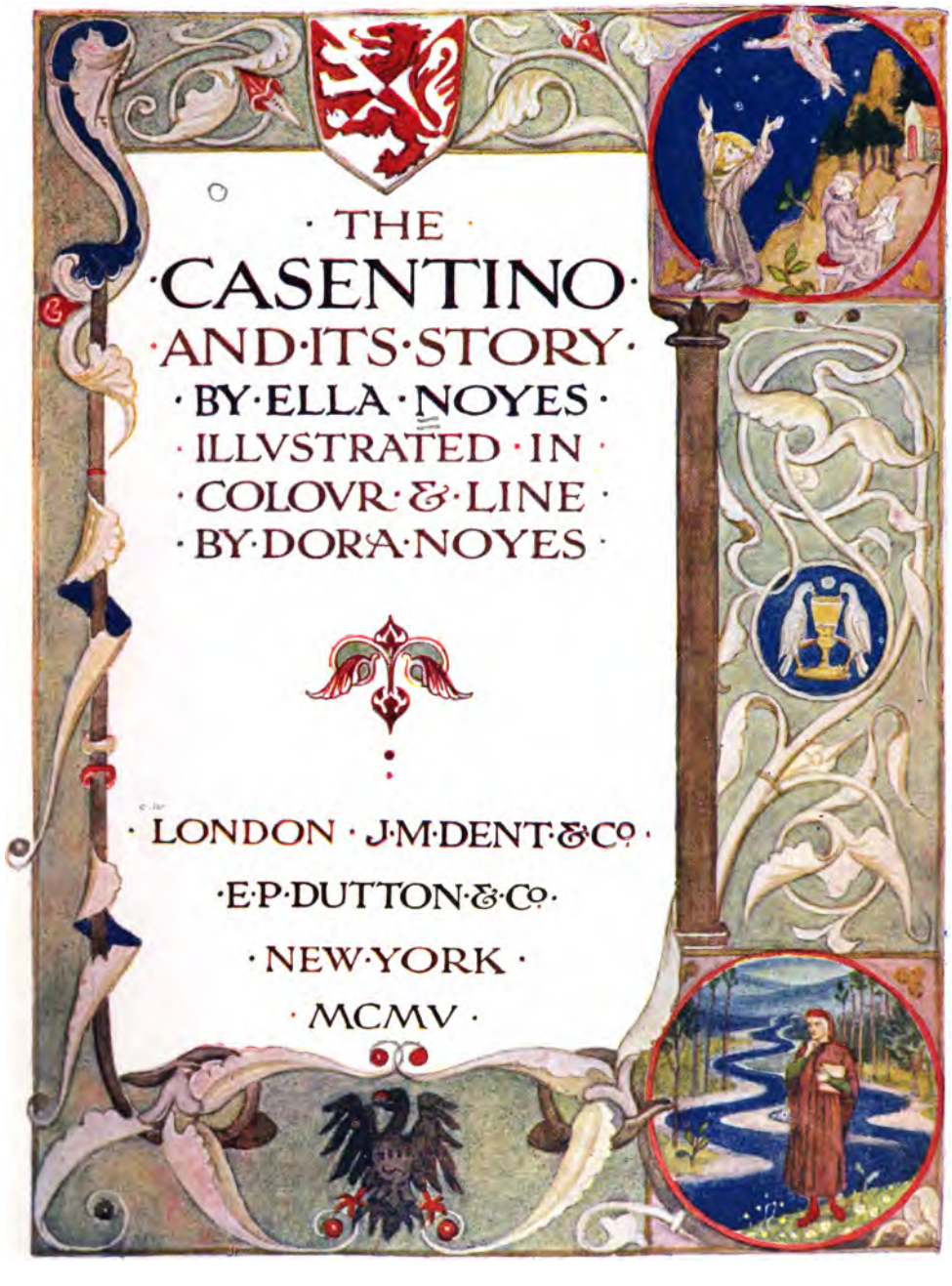
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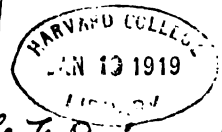
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PREFACE

A REGION so beautiful and so interesting as the Casentino needs no recommendation to the traveller. Its forests and streams and high, flower-spread lawns, the noble forms of the mountains, glorious in colour, whether lying still beneath the sun, or when, terrible in cloud, "the Apennine walks abroad with the storm," are in themselves allurement enough. But there is, besides, the romance of ruined castles, of mediæval battlefields and storied towns, while to all who reverence the human spirit in its highest manifestations, that must needs be holy ground, where, at every turn, you come upon traces of such men as Francis of Assisi and Dante Alighieri.

Those who penetrate into the Valley are sure, moreover, to be enchanted by the frank friendliness of the people, and the picturesque simplicity of their ways. But many are held back by fear of finding the accommodation too rough. There is, however, always the luxurious summer hotel at Camaldoli, installed in the old convent there, and a smaller but comfortable hostelry, with more modest prices, in the same building, open during the rest of the year, besides one or two

THE CASENTINO AND ITS STORY

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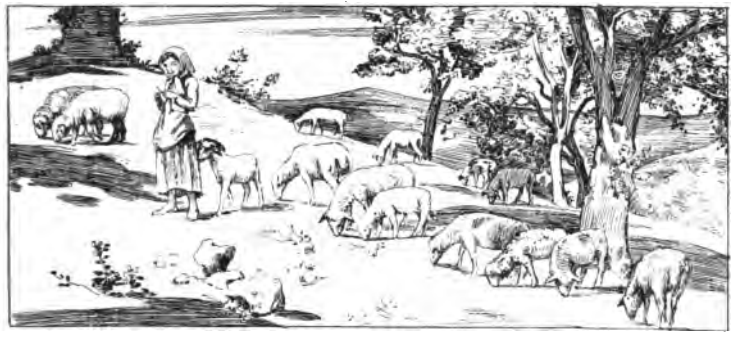
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UNDER FALTERONA

The Casentino and Its Story

CHAPTER I

THE VALLEY ENCLOSED

"Beneath him with new wonder now he views,
to all delight of human sense exposed,
in narrow room, nature's whole wealth, yea more,
a heaven on earth . . ."

About twenty-five miles north-east of Florence there lies in the heart of the sterile Apennines a green and fertile valley called the Casentino. Here the Arno takes its rise, and flows for many miles of its early course, fed by a thousand rivulets on its way. The Valley is shaped like a great conch, and surrounded on all sides by the high mountains. From the main Apennine chain which walls it on east and north the mountain barrier is continued without a break by the long range of the Pratomagno on the west, and the two

lines converge again on the south, leaving there, however, one narrow opening into the outer world. This configuration is very striking, and some think it accounts for the name Casentino, or Clusentinum in the Latin form, which they would derive from *claudere*—Italian *chiudere*—to shut in. If this theory be as just as it sounds, we may turn the name in English into the Valley Enclosed, a designation appropriate in more than one sense.

Monte Falterona, which rises 6000 feet above the level of the sea, is the loftiest mountain of the Casentino, and out of its side, very high up, springs the Arno. The traveller who would understand the position of the Valley and the course of the historic river should climb on some fresh clear day to the top of Falterona, whence you look upon one of the vastest and most famous prospects in Italy. Standing on the heap of stones which crown the painfully-won summit, your eye ranges over half the length of the peninsula, and over its entire breadth from western to eastern seas. You understand from here how on the one side with the rising sun the wisdom of the ancient East touched this fortunate land, and how on the other the vanishing glory of the evening drew the imagination of the peoples into the mysterious regions of the future and the unknown. Might one figure Italy as a ship ploughing the infinite waters, then here upon the back of Falterona would be seated the mighty oarsman, with an oar dipped in either ocean. Within these vast

boundaries many historic cities may be descried in the immense plain of the Emilia and the Romagna to the north and east, stretching to the Adriatic coast ; and in the west, over the broken crests of the near hills and the distant woods which embosom Vallombrosa, Florence sits far off within misty hollows, ringed by populous slopes. On the south-west rises the wall of the Pratomagno, shutting out the view beyond, the faint pyramid of Monte Amiata alone rising behind it, and Arezzo lies within the folds of the southern hills, hidden from sight. You stand at the centre of the Apennine system, and the great ramifications of the mountains spread away in all directions, continuing themselves far off in strange shapes against the sky. And right below, rocked in their very midst, lies the Casentino, loveliest and most fruitful spot in all the Apennine region :

> " . . . dov' è sì pregno
> l' alpestro monte, ond' è tronco Peloro,
> che in pochi lochi passa oltra quel segno."

But to see everything that it is possible to see from Falterona you must be up there at daybreak in early summer. Then, if ever, provided the morning is clear, you will *discover the Slavonian Sea and the Tuscan.* The Mediterranean, however, is never actually visible, and it is only on a morning of rare serenity that a glimmer on the eastern horizon makes known to you the *tremolar della marina.* At the same time everything around is revealed with an almost terrible distinctness.

The Casentino and Its Story

The mountains close about one, dark and awed, shrinking in the rose of dawn. Cities, villages, farms tell out their buildings in the valleys and plains, as if come to judgment; and one's spirit, all alone, stripped of the veils which protect it from reality, trembles amid this cold and awful purity. Sunrise in the mountains is a moment so sublime that to mortals it is a terror, not a joy. Senses and imagination are numbed by its intolerable perfection and the spectacle of the ever renascent day induces a strange weariness.

But when the sun has risen at last in flames out of those far-off waves, and ascending draws the mists up out of the earth, throwing over the scene the rainbow robes of illusion, one's soul begins to move unafraid. The full autumn noon is the hour of deepest enchantment on the Falterona. What pride of the eye then that gorgeous riot of purple peaks and slopes, and the loveliness of green valleys sparkling within them; those limpid forms of the distant ranges swelling and sinking one beyond the other, prolonged in iterated cadences till they fade in the incandescence of the sky beneath the sun; those golden snows that shape themselves far off above the ethereal rose and violet of the east, and all that infinite expanse of earth's tossed and rolling blue, losing itself in heaven's deep azure! To the north the strange mass of hills which forms the outer barrier of the upper Romagna presents at this hour a wonderful spectacle. A wilderness of naked volcanic rocks, shooting upwards in close

serried ranks of spearlike points and peaks, barren of verdure, unslaked by streams, unrenewed by the snows which cool the loftier heights, it might be the dry anatomy of some burnt-up world. Yet now in this enchanted noonday it appears transfigured, a magic shadowless region, its million facets cut out of palest, finest gold streaked with porphyry, and veiled in a quivering flame of rose. Beyond, in the immense level of the plain, clustered palaces glimmer within the low-lying grey heat vapour, like cities guessed at under the surface of the sea ; and as your eye travels farther and farther you will perceive, infinitely far off, hovering above the brooding mystery of the north, against the green and azure white of the sky, certain golden apparitions, the shapes of the Alpine snows ! They might be the ramparts of some kingdom "that never was on land or sea."

In the still splendour of the noonday the whole scene seems changed into the airy fabric of dreams. Vision and imagination make mock of reality. The mountains lose solidity, and appear ethereal shapes, sculptured in the sky, or vast looming shadows beneath the sun, and the whole world before one seems no more than the substance of a thought—an illusion projected by one's mind upon the void.

And as one looks down into the Casentino, far beneath, the Valley Enclosed itself becomes a thought, a memory. The past grows more vivid than the present, and the course of the river below symbolises

itself into an image of the strong currents of life and passion which once coursed through the Valley. In days long gone by, that little space circumscribed by the green hills, and now so peaceful, contained within it some of the most strenuous forces of Italian history. The chain of castled heights along the course of the river, and the rock-built towers that watch from their crags down each lateral valley, recall the feudal system which once dominated Italy, when in the general deluge, in which law and order were submerged after the downfall of the Empire and the successive invasions of the country, authority retreated to the hill-tops and lodged itself in the strong arm of the independent baron. The Casentino, held by the great Counts Palatine, the Guidi, who sword in hand had stretched their dominion over all the upper Apennine valleys on either side of the mountains and far into the Romagna, was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the seat of a power to which the yet weak and insignificant communes around gave homage and obedience.

This was the period when the Valley was most closely connected with the outer world. The traffic of life had not yet beaten out broad tracks and easy roundabout ways, but men on mule-back went straight over the face of the hills to their destination. Merchants and travellers frequented the mountains, and villages now mean and dwindled and almost inaccessible upon their rocks were then quite in the



ROMENA CASTLE FROM THE ARNO.

world's path, and there was many a great abbey, now but a heap of ruins lost in the forest far up the higher slopes, where only the hunter goes by, which was then a centre of human intercourse and political activity. The Valley was probably more populous at that time than now; where princes inhabited, men were sure to gather together.

But the castles, broken and roofless, tell to-day a story of slow decline and final downfall; of barons oppressed and crushed by the growing power of the cities; of individualism overthrown by the resurrection and triumph of the social principle of community. Proud and isolated, each on its hill-top, they are the desolate relics of a long-vanished order of things. The vineyards that grow over the field of Campaldino down there beside Poppi cover the traces of the dire struggle of Guelf and Ghibelline, which, resulting in the victory of the Florentines over the Aretines, gave the death-blow to the independence of the Guidi and to the principles which they represented.

But in the days of its ascendency in the Valley the Sword did not rule alone. It was challenged by the Cross. The footsteps of those who preached the gospel of peace may still be seen upon the mountains. Hidden within dark groves of pine trees among the crags and precipices of the *gran giogo*, yonder, to the south-east, is Camaldoli, with its hermitage, the high habitation of San Romualdo and his followers. Far to the west we have already marked the woods of

Vallombrosa, which San Giovanni Gualberto chose for the home of his new brotherhood. South-eastward, again, that dark rock resting upon the hill-top, full in heaven's eye, is La Verna, where San Francesco received the Stigmata—the most holy place in the religious history of the Middle Ages. These fortresses of the spiritual power are set higher upon the hills than the strongholds of the Guidi. The climbing feet that scorned the earth were not content with the lower peaks. Naked and alone they conquered the heights and planted upon them the Cross. From there they sent forth their voices into the Valley below, calling to the people to be at peace and to come up and praise God in unison with the voices of Nature. And to this day, though the castles have fallen to pieces and the Sword is buried at last, the Cross remains the common symbol of the hills. It is set upon the utmost peaks, and at every turn of the paths below. Till recently Camaldoli and Vallombrosa were still great monasteries; and even now the Eremo keeps its contemplative occupants, and La Verna is a thriving centre of the active Franciscans.

Yet the ideal of their founders, the standard-bearers of the Cross, has suffered a change too with time. The numbers who flocked up after them brought the world with its needs and cares into those high places, where the spirit had reigned alone, beneath the open sky. Temples arose, with roofs to shut out the stars, and the Church, ever at work to imprison the idea in a material form, has reared great worldly institutions

upon those pure impulses of the individual soul towards God.

Besides the Warrior and the Saint, another power appeared in the Valley—the Poet. This one aimed at uniting the other two, of welding the Sword and the Cross, as represented by the Empire and the Papacy, into twin foundations for the temple of God upon earth. Immediately below us is the fount of the Arno, from under which the exiled Dante indited his burning epistles to Florence and to the Emperor Henry VII., reiterating, in words great with the images of classic and sacred story, his lofty theory of the divine mission of the Emperor, and calling upon the one to submit, and upon the other to come quickly and fulfil his task. But the voice cried in the wilderness. Sooner than that of warrior or saint, the hope of the poet seemed to fail and perish. The temple of his dream was not to be built that way, and the world rolled on unheeding, moved by a purpose which was hidden from him.

Years after, mindful of the expectation of deliverance for his Italy which had filled his heart beneath the springs of Arno, and of its nonfulfilment by reason of the opposition of Florence and the Tuscan League, he placed himself once again in imagination under the fount on Falterona and launched upon the stream an immortal denunciation of its waters, its valley, and the degenerate dwellers upon its banks.

These verses are a piece of "satirical topography"[1]

[1] Ampère, *Voyage Dantesque.*

which has no parallel in literature. Nowhere can one grasp them in their full significance so well as here upon the top of Falterona, where one may follow the torrent of the poet's words almost with the bodily eyes along the whole length of the "accursed and ill-fated ditch," from its source immediately below to where after its more than hundred miles of course it restores its waters to the ocean.

". . . Per mezza Toscana si spazia
un fiumicel che nasce in Falterona,
e cento miglia di corso nol sazia,
.
. degno
ben è che il nome di tal valle pera:
chè dal principio suo, dov' è sì pregno
l' alpestro monte, ond' è tronco Peloro,
che in pochi lochi passa oltra quel segno,
infin là 've si rende per ristoro
di quel che il ciel della marina asciuga,
ond' hanno i fiumi ciò che va con loro,
virtù così per nimica si fuga
da tutti, come biscia, o per sventura
del loco o per mal uso che li fruga:
ond' hanno sì mutata lor natura
gli abitator della misera valle,
che par che Circe gli avesse in pastura.
Tra brutti porci, più degni di galle
che d' altro cibo fatto in uman uso,
dirizza prima il suo povero calle.
Botoli trova poi, venendo giuso,
ringhiosi più che non chiede lor possa,
ed a lor, disdegnosa, torce il muso.
Vassi cadendo, e, quanto ella più ingrossa,
tanto più trova di can farsi lupi
la maledetta e sventurata fossa.

The Valley Enclosed

Discesa poi per più pelaghi cupi,
trova le volpi, sì piene di froda
che non temono ingegno che le occupi."[1]

The passion for righteousness which fired these words was spent long ago, and with the decline of the Middle Ages the Casentino ceased to have any influence upon the world outside its mountains. Even the message of the Cross was suffocated by worldly ambition, or enfeebled by lack of zeal. The only share which the Valley had later in the historic movements of the

[1] "Through the midst of Tuscany there spreads a stream which rises in Falterona, and a course of a hundred miles satiates it not.
.
., but verily 'tis meet that the name of such a vale perish,
For from its beginning (where the rugged mountain chain, whence Pelorus is cut off, is so fruitful that in few places it exceeds that mark),
As far as there where it yields itself to restore that which the sky soaks up from the sea, whence rivers have that which flows with them,
Virtue is driven forth as an enemy by all, even as a snake, either because of the ill-favoured place or of evil habit which incites them;
Wherefore the dwellers in the wretched vale have so changed their nature that it seems as if Circe had them in her pasturing.
Among filthy hogs, more worthy of acorns than of other food made for the use of man, it first directs its feeble course.
Then, coming downward, it finds curs snarling more than their power warrants, and from them scornfully turns aside its snout.
On it goes in its descent, and, the greater its increase, the more it finds the dogs growing to wolves, this accurst and ill-fated ditch.
Having then descended through many deep gorges, it finds the foxes so full of fraud that they fear no wit that may trap them."
—*Purgatorio*, C. xiv., vv. 16-18 and 29-54, Temple Classics Ed.

great city, whose life it fed with the waters from its hills, was in giving hospitality to the philosophic thought and speculation which occupied the chosen minds of the Renaissance, when all strenuous struggle for good or evil was over in Italy. For it was in the woods of Camaldoli yonder that the Medicean Platonists carried on, during the summer heats, their famous discussions on the ideal life and the true aim of human existence, while enjoying the hospitality of the learned and genial successor of San Romualdo, the Prior Mariotti.

So in a spiritual dilettantism the last echoes of the great ideas which go to determine the issues of history die out in the Casentino. Since then the Valley has remained remote and forgotten, strewn with the wrecks of its tumultuous days. Its fairness remains to it, touched by the pensiveness which belongs to the scenes of old struggles and passion. And it has its own life, quiet and strong. The forests clothe themselves every spring afresh, the flowers come again, and the Arno is replenished continually at its source. And if one seeks out the villages and farms high up among the woods of the Casentino, one finds them still the abundant source of a strong fresh peasant life, sweet-blooded, pastoral, full of melody, shut in by the hills from contact with the vulgarising influences of modern progress. In these little communities a primitive equality and simplicity reign; the present is not an unchanged version of the conscience-stricken Middle Ages, but of a much more ancient past, carrying one back to the

times when flocks and herds were first brought to feed upon the mountain grass and upon the acorns of these many times millennial forests.

Capo d'Arno, the source of the historic stream, is in a cleft of the hill immediately beneath the summit of Falterona. The spot is hidden in a wilderness of low beech scrub, and is not easy to find unless the guide be well acquainted with the hills: one is apt to be misled by the lesser rivulets that one comes across on the quest. But having scrambled out at last from the tangled thickets into a pleasant green space beside the famous fount, one feels that it would be impossible to mistake any other for this, the royal stream. For Arno does not steal out almost unseen from the earth like some beginnings that grow to great ends. Its first appearance is worthy of its storied course. A mass of rocks heaped up by earthquakes and storms form a sort of conch within the lap of the mountain, and out of them the springs pour forth from some inexhaustible well in the heart of the earth in a semicircle of seven jets, full and strong, which leap down over the rocks and boulders of the ravine, uniting in a torrent which even in this its babyhood is abundant and loud. You follow its progress with the eye, from the first fall over the rocks between the steep hillsides to that deep gorge below, where the brother streams, Arnino and Arnaccio, bring the earliest tribute, and down to the sharp turn westwards where it flashes silver in the deep shadow of the opposite hills. Then marking the sweep of the gorge

southwards again, you are carried in imagination along the track of the Dantesque topography, past Porciano and its *porci* and away and away down the Casentino, out at the gateway beyond Bibbiena, to that sudden disdainful turn of the "snout" away from the curs of Arezzo. And now, still with your mind's eye, you pursue it on its northward flow along the Val d'Arno, till directly opposite its source it emerges into view again in the far-off valleys, bearing upon its full-grown flood Florence, fairest of all cities, but peopled, in the poet's eyes, with wolves. Dim and dreamlike, her *Cupalone* grows upon the sight. Thus in one moment you may lift your eyes from the beginning to the culmination of the great current which beauty and the kindliness of men and time's proofs clear from the curse of foulness and calamity which Dante's impatient spirit put upon it.

And in the people that dwell beside the springs of Arno one sees the elements and beginnings, young and ever renewed, of that human life which at its meridian in history made the city there below the wonder of culture and art that she once was, and that in memory she will always remain, when by the vast arc of her spirit's flight in the empyrean of beauty and joyousness she proved herself too great to be contained in the cosmos of the mediæval sage. For her the future, not the past. Florence, denounced by Dante and going on her way unmoved, not straight to the goal, but very far round as her river goes, is justified at last, and we

recognise her now in the sum of all the deeds of all her sons, nobler than that noblest of them all.

It happens often, in still fine weather, that the distant view is hid in mist. On mild days in October and November, beyond the multitudinous velvet folds of the near hills the world will appear a wide, tranquil, white sea, out of which the long backs of the mountain ranges rise blue and shadowy, one behind the other, in still and suave lines, till they melt into the sky. On such a day let the past repose beneath its pall. The present is so sweet that it suffices. In truth, for those who sit here at the beginning of things the present seems to be far behind the past, and all that winding course of the river and progress of the centuries is as it were to come. The green lawn upon which you sit beside the murmurous cradle of Arno is as it always has been, and a stray shepherd or hunter of thousands of years back would have warmed himself by just such a crackling flame of beech twigs as your guide has lighted now.

The mountain has returned to a solitude which carries us back beyond the time of the Etruscans, who used to bring their sick to a healing lake not far from Capo d'Arno. This lake is now dried up, but the form of the rocks indicates where it was, and its healing virtue, together with the existence of a temple beside it, is conjectured from the discovery there in 1830 of a quantity of votive offerings: bronze objects of Etruscan workmanship, weapons, chains and orna-

ments, above all, statuettes, some of them belonging to the best period of Etruscan art. Many of these may now be seen in the British Museum.

The descent of the mountain to the little town of Stia far below is a quick slide, first down the steep green glades between the brushwood, very different to the slow climb up. Then follows a delightful progress across wild sweet pastures strewn with boulders, and along paths that cling to the hillside above the hanging forest of oak, and deep valleys where clusters of dwellings show the summer haunts of the shepherd folk. You pass beside vast sheep-folds, and for those who go up by night to see the sun rise on the top the way is barred by great sheep-dogs, white growling bears, till the shepherds come to call them back. But about the end of September the flocks abandon the green Alps and move slowly down to their winter pastures in the far-off Maremma, the marshy region between the mountains and the Tyrrhenian Sea, unwholesome in summer for man and beast. After they are gone the slopes are solitary except for a thin flock of sheep here and there, or a few large-horned kine, white and gentle-eyed, which belong to the high farms, and crop between the stones all the winter through in the sunny places where the snow does not lie long. They are herded by sweet-faced children with shy eyes, creatures innocent of the arts of reading or writing, that couch on the rocks in the mild winter sunshine, chattering together, or singing, each one alone, their

interminable chants. It is from up here in the mountains that the vein of natural song springs for which the Tuscan peasants are noted.

There is another way from the Falterona down to Stia, much longer than the direct path, but leading one through some delicious places. You descend first a bare precipitous hill. I remember once receiving a strange impression as I came down that way. It was late in October, but the sun burnt with a fervour which its summer rays have not. There had been stormy weather a month earlier, and snow had fallen up here; large patches still lay high up, filling the open spaces between the thickets. We had ploughed down knee-deep through the drifts, and had come out on the side of the hill, where all was shadeless, stony, dry. Faint with the heat, our throats parched, we looked up behind us to where we had just passed. Over the blinding snow the sky bent down upon us, black in the intensity of its burning blue. Some autumn beech trees made a patch like fire upon the terrible white. I should never have thought that earth could take on so infernal an aspect. We stumbled and slipped down the steep, our feet hurt by the loose stones that rolled from under them, and, following a track over the treeless moor below, we were soon comforted by the sound of water near, and came suddenly upon a rift in the mountain, out of which water gushed full and abundant, leaping from stone to stone, and welling in little pools. After stooping to drink and resting a little while in the shade

of the trees that grew in the ravine, we crossed the torrent; and now our way led over lovely pastures and down and down the widening gorge, to the point of the first meeting of the streams.

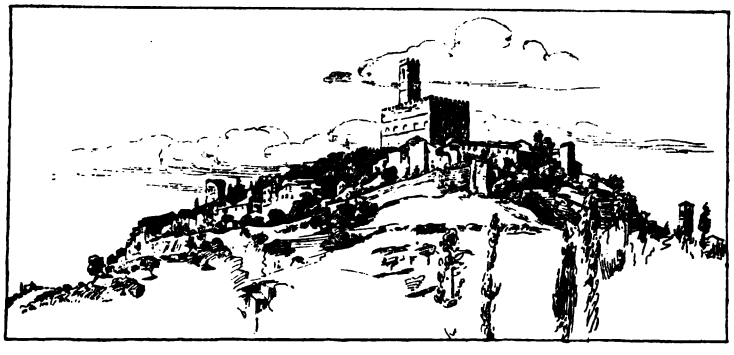
Close here there is a mountain farm, set in the midst of natural lawns, close cropped, cool and verdant, where the waters around make a refreshing noise as they rush down the ravines. Beneath this place we crossed the now swollen Arno, and, entering the chestnut forest on the other side, pursued our way through broad spaces of sunshine and shadow, where beneath the golden leaves women and children were picking up the ruddy fruit out of the litter of thorny yellowed husks and creamy skins upon the ground. The meek kerchiefed heads were lifted as we passed, and mild eyes gazed at us in wonder. One of the women called out after us, "Are you not come from very far off?" To us it seemed that it was she and her companions who were remote, left behind in some golden age in an eternal afternoon of sunshine and peace.

Presently we passed through a tiny village which clung to the hillside. In the steep paved passage between the stone dwellings one or two sybil-like crones were creeping in the sunshine. Continuing round the hill, we reached at last the other side and found ourselves in view once more of the Arno, which had made a great sweep between the hills, and, now a considerable stream, flowing in a wide stony bed, was

on its way southwards through the upper part of the main valley. Our road went on along the hillside above it, always through chestnut woods, till upon the verge of a steep slope in front rose the dark spire of cypresses which stands beside the mountain church of Sta. Maria delle Grazie, and in an hour more we were in the steep street of Stia.



A VILLAGE CRONE



POPPI FROM THE SOUTH-EAST

CHAPTER II

THE SWORD IN THE VALLEY

"Cities of men with lofty gates and towers,
concourse in arms, fierce faces threatening war,
giants of mighty bone, and bold emprise."

THE traces of the rule of the strong arm, under which the Casentino lay for many centuries, are still visible to-day. As you look down the plain from castled hill to castled hill, and along the many folds of the mountain ramparts, where every village, girt with ruined walls, bristles upon a crag of defence, you think that some Cadmus must once have sown the valley with dragons' teeth. No field better fitted for that deadly seed. The barons, lay or ecclesiastic, who in the chaos of the ninth and tenth centuries in Italy had possessed themselves of practical authority, could satisfy, in the impregnable fastnesses of these mountains, the ideal of individuality inherited from long-bearded or Teutonic ancestors, by warring upon one another,

or stooping upon the defenceless peasants in the valleys, or the feeble communities in their neighbourhood. During this period in Italy the Eagle of the Empire, however omnipotent in simulacrum upon the banners of Frankish or German sovereigns, was in effect superseded in the Casentino, and everywhere within range of the Apennines, by the petty screaming lords of the mountain eyries.

Within the Valley Enclosed the strong places were early united under a single rule. From the latter part of the tenth century, if not earlier, all the upper and most important part of the Casentino was held by the great house of the Guidi. These barons, who owned vast territories in Tuscany and the Romagna on either side of the Apennines and held the grand title of Counts Palatine, were some of the most potent elements in the early history of Florence. In the pages of Dante and of Giovanni Villani and other Florentine writers of that time they are called *i Conti* without further distinction.

Their origin, like that of so many great Italian houses of the Middle Ages, is wrapped in obscurity. Nothing seems to be certainly known of them till the latter part of the tenth century, when they were already powerful. And at this period they appear still in a borderland of legend and history. Early chroniclers relate a tale of love as the foundation of the fortunes of the family. The young Lord Tegrimo, or Guido, was hunting one day in the forest of Modigliana,

and killed a fair white doe. Finding himself beneath the castle of the Countess Engelrada, he sent his page with the doe to lay it as an offering at her feet. Engelrada was the daughter of the Duke of Ravenna, and was very beautiful and very rich; she ruled Modigliana in the Romagna, not far from Faenza, with all the country round. Many were the wooers that knelt at her feet, only to be dismissed with scorn. But the offering of the doe, and perhaps some glimpse which she had already had of the handsome young huntsman, touched her hard heart and she commanded the presence of Tegrimo in her bower, and before long she yielded him her heart and her hand, together with all her vast possessions in the Romagna and Tuscany.

This couple are mentioned in contemporary documents, and the succession of their posterity may be gathered from ancient deeds, in which grants made by them to religious foundations are recorded. The early chroniclers supplement this dry memorial by more romantic details of the sinful lives for which these pious gifts were usually a tardy death-bed expiation. They tell us that Guido, son of Tegrimo, was very powerful in Ravenna, where he made himself so hateful by violence and lust that the people massacred him and all his house. One baby son alone escaped, being hidden by his foster-mother, and grew up to take terrible revenge upon the slayers of his kindred. So fierce was his exultation over his slaughtered enemies that he is said to have licked their blood from his sword,

whence his name of Tegrimo, or Guido *Bevisangue*. This bloodthirsty individual founded the once famous Abbey of Strumi, near Poppi, for the white-robed followers of St. Bernard. His son Guido appears as the founder of churches and patron of monasteries, and might have come down to history in an amiable light had it not been for that scourge of sinners, Peter Damian, who in one of his epistles gives a different view of the baron's character. He narrates how a certain priest in a vision was conducted by St. Benedict into Hell, where he saw many who had been great nobles on earth suffering terrible torments because of their sins. And among other things he saw a number of hideous devils busily making great preparations, running backwards and forwards, hurrying and panting, like servants getting a house ready for the reception of some great and honoured guest, and was told that they expected Count Guido on the fourth day from then ; whereupon the priest woke up and related what he had seen, and on the fourth day, as predicted, the Count died.

And so Guido succeeded Guido, each one adding to the power and influence of the house. The grandson of him whose doom Peter Damian relates is the first of the Counts who joined the warlike name of Guerra to the original Guido. This first Guidoguerra was a man of great authority, and shared the government of Tuscany with those great princesses, the Countess Beatrice and her daughter, the famous Matilda. His sons joined in the Crusades, and were taken captive by the Saracens ;

the Count is recorded to have pawned a great silver crucifix for their ransom. He was succeeded by one of these crusading heroes, Guidoguerra II., known as the Marquis, a title bestowed upon him by the Grancontessa Matilda, who seems to have adopted him as her son, and to have given him equal jurisdiction with herself in Tuscany. Both he and his father were generous in their gifts to churches and convents. The Marquis was followed by his son, Guidoguerra III. In this Count, who was the companion of crusading kings, and foremost in the councils of the young Emperor Barbarossa, the house reached the highest summit of its power and prosperity. A chronicler of the time tells us that at his death, in 1157, every Italian wept; that he was the greatest of the princes of the Empire, and the mirror of nobility for all Italy. During his absence in the Holy Land, and after his early death, while his son was yet a child, the dominions of the Guidi were ruled by his sister Sofia, the Abbess of Pratovecchio. Sofia was a woman of very notable character—a typical nun princess of the twelfth century, the female counterpart of the fighting bishop of the day, who wore a coat of mail and carried a sword for a pastoral staff. When making her profession at the age of fifteen, with great pomp and ceremony, in the presence of bishops and high ecclesiastical dignitaries, she took the veil from the altar and placed it over her own head, saying, "I will not that you bishops should put it on me; but with my own act I give myself to my Lord

Jesus Christ." Her widowed mother, the Countess Imilia, founded for her the Convent of S. Giovanni, which still exists at Pratovecchio. It quickly became a great and powerful community, through the generous endowments bestowed upon it by the Guidi, and the Abbess ruled it, and its dependent religious houses, and vassal castles and territories, with a strong hand. She was seen constantly on horseback, riding from place to place, surrounded by her men-at-arms, to administer justice to her subjects. When she approached one of her convents, the nuns, headed by their abbess, would come forth in procession to a great distance to meet her, and would receive her kneeling humbly upon the ground. The forests and green valleys where the ruined monasteries of the Apennines once stood are empty of such pictures now. But these veiled votaries of religion were not so meek as they appeared, and their conduct often called forth the harsh reproof of their superior. On one occasion she replied to their greetings thus: "I do not salute you, for you are the most wicked of women and of evil report, and bring shame upon my house." The nunneries indeed were full of the party spirit of the time, and were often nests of political intrigue, and there are records of secret murders and evil deeds committed within those subject to the Abbess Sofia at the instigation of the Counts.

The gallant Abbess did not allow the influence of her House to decline during the minority of her



CONVENT OF THE MONACHE VECCHIE AT PRATOVECCHIO.

nephew. She was in constant attendance upon Frederick Barbarossa's Empress when that lady accompanied her lord into Italy. The young Count grew up in the sunshine of the Imperial favour, and followed the Emperor in all his wars later, espousing his cause zealously in the great quarrel with the Church. With this Guidoguerra, fourth of the name, the history of the House emerges into clearer light. As the ancestor of the several branches of the Guidi, which played a prominent and conflicting part in the faction warfare of later days, and himself a mighty prince and a man of robust and striking personality, he has obscured the more shadowy memories of his fathers, and stands in history as the most famous of all the *Conti*. His fame is coupled with that of his wife, *the good Gualdrada*, daughter of a rich Florentine citizen, Messer Bellincione Berti dei Ravegnani, the "alto Bellincione" named to Dante among the noble Florentines of old by Cacciaguida in the *Paradiso* (C. xvi., v. 99) In another passage (C. xv., vv. 112-114) Cacciaguida cites Bellincione and his wife as examples in their attire of the simplicity and modesty used in the good old days.

Giovanni Villani and other fourteenth century writers tell a charming tale about the marriage of Guidoguerra and Gualdrada. The following is Boccaccio's version of it:—"The Emperor Otho IV., chancing to be in Florence, and to make the city more joyous by his presence, having betaken himself to the festival in the

Church of St. John, it happened that together with the other gentlewomen of the city, according to our custom, the wife of Messer Berto came to the church and brought with her her daughter, named Gualdrada, who was still a maiden ; and when they had seated themselves on one side with the other women, all the bystanders, because the damsel was passing beautiful in form and in stature, turned to look at her, and among others the Emperor, who, having greatly praised both her fairness and the modesty of her mien, asked Messer Berto who she was. To which Messer Berto, smiling, answered : 'She is the daughter of one who is willing that you should kiss her if it so pleases you.' These words were heard by the damsel, who was close by ; and rising to her feet and looking awhile at her father, her countenance changing somewhat with shame, she said : 'My father, do not so courteously promise away my honour, for of a surety none shall ever kiss me, save he whom you give me for husband.'" The story continues, that the Emperor was still more pleased with her because of her words, and calling to him the noble youth Count Guido, who was in his train, urged him to marry her ; and Guido being nothing loth, having already fallen in love with the maiden, the marriage was performed, and Otho bestowed upon them the Casentino as Gualdrada's dowry.

But, alas for romance, the Guidi, as we know, had possessed the Casentino long before. The chroniclers must have confused Gualdrada with the far-off

Engelrada. And, what is worse, it is quite clear from documentary evidence that Gualdrada was a married woman of many years' standing in 1208 when Otho first came to Italy, being already in 1180 the wife of Guidoguerra. But that she was as virtuous and beautiful as the story says we need not doubt. It is Dante who speaks of her as "the good Gualdrada." The Count, her husband, has left a different impress on history. The Faentine chronicler, who lauds Guidoguerra III. in such high terms, bewails the dissimilarity of the son, whom he likens to Rehoboam, in that he little followed in his father's footsteps, but, despising the wise and discreet, was led by the counsel of the young and foolish. There is a letter extant addressed to the Count by Pope Innocent III. in 1213, exhorting him to repent the many crimes of his early life, instead of adding a multitude of fresh ones to them in his old age, and in especial to mend his conduct towards the religious houses. For it seems that he had not only oppressed and afflicted his neighbours the monks of Camaldoli with many wrongs, but by making a road near the Eremo he had intruded into their solitude armed men, and, worse still, play actors and light women, there where from of old no woman was ever allowed to enter. Moreover, he had carried off all the oxen of the monks. But though a reprobate in the eyes of Pope and bishops, the merry baron captured the popular fancy, and many tales became current about him. Magister Boncompagno,

a famous grammarian of the thirteenth century, relates the pranks which Guidoguerra played upon the minstrels and buffoons who came to his palace, and at whose expense his whimsical and brutal humour diverted itself in a manner little to their taste. He punned in practical fashion upon their names, compelling one called *Malanotte* to spend all night upon the roof in the snow, and another, *Maldecorpo*, to lie and fizzle between two fires, while a third suffered for his name of *Abbas* by having his hair pulled out so as to simulate a tonsure. And other like tricks are told of him.

Guidoguerra shared in the general depression of the Ghibellines after the great defeat of Barbarossa at Legnano. From this time begins a gradual decline in the power of the Guidi. The day of the independent baron in Italy was passing by. The growing cities opposed a new and mighty force to the feudal system, which had never thoroughly conquered the country. As a city waxed in power and consequence the independent magnates in its neighbourhood grew weaker, and were compelled one by one to seek the alliance and support of the city itself by condescending to share citizenship with the burghers. Faenza and Pistoia, and other communes that had obeyed Guidoguerra's father, now openly defied him, and, when the trial of arms came, showed themselves strong enough to exact terms from him. His vassals revolted against the subjection in which they had hitherto been held, and he was forced to grant them

rights in the lands which they tilled. Meanwhile Florence was quietly extending herself outside her walls. During the thirteenth century she destroyed one by one the independent strongholds upon the hills around, compelling their lords to acknowledge her supremacy and receiving them into her own community, to which they brought, together with a strong and rich vitality, the elements of discord. Each day this natural process extended farther, and the great Counts Palatine, the Guidi themselves, began to be affected by it. The Republic succeeded in dealing Guidoguerra many severe blows. By armed attack, and more often by insidiously encouraging discontent among his vassals and serfs, she usurped the sovereignty of many of his castles, abbeys and fiefs in her neighbourhood. United with the other Guelf cities of Tuscany, she fought in him the ally and supporter of the hated Frederick Barbarossa and his son Henry VI. In 1196, the Count, having lost all faith in the Empire, which was now divided by the rival claims of two candidates and had for the time lost its hold upon Italy, began to reconcile himself to the new order of things, and made common cause with the Guelf League of the Tuscan cities. With the other Guelf chiefs he paid homage to Otho IV. when that Emperor came to Italy in 1309. Four years later he died, leaving his sons established as citizens and subjects of Florence, and in possession of the houses of the Ravignani *over the gate*, which they had in-

herited through their mother, the Countess Gualdrada. These houses beside the ancient gate of San Pietro were afterwards sold by the Guidi to the *Black* Cerchi, a branch of the Cerchi which adhered to the party of the Neri in opposition to its kinsmen, the leaders of the Bianchi. These Black Cerchi are the *new felony of such great weight* with which Dante declares out of the mouth of Cacciaguida that the gate was laden in his time.

The heritage which Guidoguerra, or Guido il Vecchio as he is more often called, bequeathed, included no less than five hundred castles in Tuscany and the Romagna. These vast possessions were confirmed to his sons by a diploma of Frederick II. The five sons, Guido, Ruggero, Tegrimo, Aghinolfo and Marcovaldo, shared the inheritance equally ; and the result was that the dominion was broken up, the House divided into several branches, which quickly acquired diverse and conflicting interests, with a consequent great weakening of its power and influence. It is now that the Guidi become more intimately associated with the Casentino. Places in the Valley acquire new importance as the chief castles of the different branches, giving them their distinguishing title. Thus we have the Counts of Battifolle and Poppi, descended from Guido, the eldest son, the Counts of Romena sprung from Aghinolfo, and those of Porciano from Tegrimo. But the division was not well defined at first, and the more important strongholds were held by the whole

family in common for a while and divided later. Each branch held fiefs in many different places, so that the Casentino Counts are met with as lords of castles in the Romagna, while their kinsmen of the Romagna, the Counts of Dovadola, Marcovaldo's posterity, and the lords of Bagno, descended from Guido Novello, eldest son of Guido, have territories also in the Casentino.

For a while the sons of Guido il Vecchio held together, and as adherents of Frederick II., to whose side they reverted as soon as the Ghibelline cause began to revive under that great monarch, they shared in the good fortunes of the Imperial party and in its subsequent decline. As warriors, and as podestàs in cities where the Ghibellines were uppermost, they are prominent in the tumultuous field of thirteenth century politics. But before long, Marcovaldo, who had married a lady of the Alberti family, ardent Guelf partisans, abandoned the Ghibelline side. Dying early, he left his sons to the care of his widow, Countess Beatrice, who taught them to be zealous Guelfs, and the elder, named Guidoguerra like his grandfather, grew up to be a famous champion and defender of Holy Church, while his cousin, Guido Novello, was as prominent in the opposite camp. This is that Guidoguerra whom Dante, with an inexorable sense of justice, places in Hell for his sins, rendering at the same time an immortal tribute to his wisdom and valour on earth :

" Nepote fu della buona Gualdrada ;
Guido Guerra ebbe nome, ed in sua vita
Fece col senno assai e con la spada ! "[1]

As he stands with Virgil, looking upon the shame of the great chief and of the two noble Florentines that share the same doom, the poet weeps and addresses them with reverent words :

" Di vostra terra sono : e sempre mai
L' opre di voi e gli onorati nomi
Con affezion ritrassi ed ascoltai ! "[2]

Guidoguerra is described by historians as a peerless knight, greedy of glory, scornful of peril, generous of soul, prompt even to rashness in battle, in which he often redeemed a seemingly hopeless situation and snatched victory from the foe. He and Guido Novello, chiefs of the rival factions, make the history of the Guidi in the thirteenth century. They fought furiously against each other, burning and sacking one another's lands. And now for the first time the Casentino saw the House that had ruled it so long, divided against itself, and had to suffer the miseries of a desolating civil strife. During the Guelf ascendency after the death of Frederick II., Guidoguerra, foremost in the Florentine councils and camp, was triumphant over his

[1] Grandson he was of the good Gualdrada ; Guidoguerra was his name, and in his lifetime he did great things with wisdom and with his sword.—*Inferno*, C. xvi., vv. 37-39, Temple Classics Ed.

[2] " Of your city am I, and ever your deeds and honoured name with affection have I rehearsed and heard."—*Ibid.* vv. 58-60.

Ghibelline cousin, who was banned as a rebel by the Republic. But at the great reckoning at Montaperti, "which made the Arbia run red," Guido Novello was revenged; and when Guidoguerra and the Guelfs were scattered to the winds, he was one of the loudest of the victors in urging the famous proposal "to do away with Florence," *tor via Fiorenza.* The city was saved from destruction by Farinata degli Uberti, as is well known, but the Ghibelline party entered it and seized all authority. Guido Novello was appointed Podestà. He persecuted the Guelfs without mercy, driving them into exile, and with special malignity he harried and wasted the lands of his defeated kinsmen in the Casentino. It was he that made the road out of Florence, which is still called Via Ghibellina, that his armed vassals from the mountains might be able to enter the city and come to his assistance at his summons the more easily and quickly.

But Fortune was preparing a new revolution of her wheel. The great defeat of King Manfred and the Ghibellines by Charles of Anjou at Benevento in 1266 was the signal for Guido Novello's fall. Guidoguerra at the head of the Florentine exiles had fought valiantly on the side of the French in this conflict. It is related that, before the battle, King Manfred, watching the hosts of the enemy form in their ranks, asked whence came the band of warriors who appeared so splendidly caparisoned, and it was told him that they were the Guelf exiles from Florence and the other

cities of Tuscany, whereupon he said, "Those men cannot lose to-day."

The Florentines, who hated Guido Novello for his tyrannical and oppressive rule, were overjoyed at the news of Benevento, and the Podestà trembled in his palace. He endeavoured to propitiate them by granting them the reforms which he had refused before, but only reaped their scorn. They took the government out of his hands, and before long drove him out of the city. His friends and adherents shared his fall, and the Ghibelline party was overthrown for good in Florence. Guidoguerra, appointed Vicar-General of Tuscany for the Church, re-entered the city at the head of the Guelf party, and effectually cleared it of the rival faction. After this we lose sight of this noble figure. He is thought to have been one of the barons who accompanied Louis IX. on his crusade. His death is recorded in 1272. The line of Dovadola was carried on after him by his nephew, Guido Salvatico, who also was an active Guelf partisan, and continually engaged in feuds with his cousins of Porciano and his other Ghibelline kinsmen. He was Podestà of Siena at one time, and led the Sienese forces in the battle of Campaldino. In the quarrel of the Bianchi and Neri, later in Florence, he and his son Ruggero were zealous "Black" partisans. The only other thing we know about this baron with the fierce-sounding name, apart from Boccaccio's mention of him as Dante's host in the Casentino, a statement which

the political difference between him and the poet makes it difficult to credit, is that he was not a dutiful grandson. His grandmother, Countess Beatrice, complains of him in her will, recording that "he has not given me my alimony which he owed, and has molested my possessions, and when I was ill, almost to death, he did not visit me, nor has he borne himself to me as a grandson should do to his grandmother." So she only bequeathed five "livre" to him, and with that "let him be content."[1]

After his expulsion from Florence, the fortunes of Guido Novello steadily declined. He and his sons joined the standard of the young Corradino of Suabia in 1268, and shared in the disaster of Tagliacozzo. They were in consequence excommunicated, and by a fresh decree proclaimed rebels to Florence. At Colle di Valdelsa, where he commanded the Sienese and was completely defeated, Guido earned nothing but humiliation. Everywhere his vassals rebelled, and wrested from him rights and privileges. In the Casentino and elsewhere the Florentines persecuted him ceaselessly, till at last he was compelled to humble himself to the Pope and to Charles of Anjou. But it was to gain a breathing space only; and soon his sword was unsheathed again, and in the company of the great Guido da Montefeltro he was fighting vigorously for his party.

The general peace of 1280 brought quiet for a

[1] See "Bulletino della Società Dantesca," March 1904.

time to the exhausted factions, but the repose only nursed new quarrels. War broke out between Florence and Arezzo, and the Casentino, which lies between the two, became the chief scene of the struggle. Here on the 11th of June 1289, on the plain of Campaldino, beneath Poppi, the two factions met in one of the great battles of the long-continued strife. After a fierce struggle, the Aretini and their Ghibelline allies were completely defeated. Guido Novello, who was Podestà of Arezzo at the time and had held high command in the battle, fled from the field into his castle of Poppi. But he was not able to hold it for long. A year later the Florentines returned into the Valley, and sacked and destroyed this his principal stronghold, and also Fronzola, Raggiolo, Cetica and his other Casentinese fortresses, spoiling all the land with fire and sword. Four years later the fallen chief, now powerless and despised, died.

Guido Novello's brother, Count Simone di Battifolle, also a notable warrior, equally distinguished for ferocity and for piety, was already dead. He had been at first a zealous Ghibelline, had fought at Montaperti, had seen his lands and castles in the Casentino and elsewhere wasted when the Guelfs got the upper hand, and had revenged himself upon his foes, whenever he found an opportunity, with a cruelty exceptional even in those days. But quarrels had arisen between him and his brother over the division of the paternal heritage, and had bred a terrible hatred between these two wrathful

spirits of the thirteenth century; and Simone, enraged by his brother's usurpation of his rights, had deserted the common cause and carried his sword to the aid of Florence and the Church. A few years later he died. His son Guido, who had changed sides with him, was able after Campaldino, with the favour of Florence, to add a large share of his uncle's dominions to those which he had inherited from his father. The Republic aided him with money in rebuilding Poppi and the other strongholds which had been destroyed. This Count Guido enjoyed considerable power and influence. He seems to have been of a pacific disposition, and to have avoided entanglement in the fatal strife of Bianchi and Neri which now broke out in Florence, involving all the magnates both within and without the walls. He ruled the city later on, from 1316 to 1321, as Vicar for King Robert of Naples, to whom the Republic had yielded itself for a time for the sake of peace, and the people, utterly exhausted by their own restless quarrelsome temper, submitted meekly to him and enjoyed a spell of peace under his benign rule. The Palazzo Vecchio is an abiding memorial in Florence of Count Guido, by whose order it was begun and in great part built, after the design, it is said, of his own palace at Poppi.

Of the remaining sons of Guidoguerra and Gualdrada, Ruggero died young, leaving his heritage to be a bone of contention between his brothers. Aghinolfo, founder of the line of Romena, was succeeded by his

son Guido, whose just and pacific rule, when Podestà of Arezzo at a time of fierce partisan passion, won him the surname of Pace, and the praises of Fra Guittone d'Arezzo, leader of the school of Italian poetry which preceded the *dolce stil novo*. Tegrimo, ancestor of the Counts of Porciano, was a faithful follower of Frederick II. His son, another Guido, served the Imperial party in early life, but later made peace with the Pope, and the next generation of both these branches was no longer continuously steadfast to the old political faith. Guido Pace's sons, the four Counts of Romena, Alessandro, Aghinolfo, Guido and Bandino, after the reconciliation of the parties by Cardinal Latino in 1281, served Florence and the Pope, but with lapses to the Ghibelline side when it suited their interests. Guido died early. Bandino, who was an ecclesiastic, became Bishop of Arezzo, and ruled the Romagna as Papal Vicar for a time: he and his brothers made themselves hated there by their arrogance and violence. Their lives were full of the adventure and moving accidents of the times. They were embroiled in constant feuds with other great houses, and Aghinolfo lay for some time in a dungeon, where in order to get free he had to leave his young sons to languish in his stead. For their frequent disloyalty to Florence the Counts were often under the ban of the Republic; Alessandro and Aghinolfo threw in their lot with the exiled Bianchi after 1301, and Alessandro is supposed to have been captain of the party at one time. The

Counts of Porciano, grandsons of Tegrimo, were equally vacillating in their policy.

But already the heroic period of the Conti Guidi was quite past. The divisions and subdivisions of the family dominions, the breaking of the old party tie, and the steady encroachments of the powerful communes around, were hastening the inevitable end of these representatives of the old feudalism. The great-grandsons of Guidoguerra had inherited his pride and tyrannical spirit; but they did not disdain to commit crimes unworthy of their great lineage. The Counts of Porciano robbed the merchants that passed beneath their castle, and in 1281 the Counts of Romena were banned by Florence for having instigated one Maestro Adamo to make coins for them at their castle, counterfeiting the golden florins of the Republic. Their miserable tool was burnt alive for the crime. He appears in a famous passage of the *Inferno* (C. xxx.), swollen out of all human semblance by a heavy dropsy, and calls upon Dante to pay heed to his woe, telling his tale in words awful with the thirst of tongue and of vindictive soul:

". Guardate ed attendete
alla miseria del maestro Adamo:
 io ebbi, vivo, assai di quel ch' io volli,
 ed ora, lasso! un gocciol d' acqua bramo.
Li ruscelletti, che dai verdi colli
 del Casentin discendon giuso in Arno
 facendo i lor canali freddi e molli,
Sempre mi stanno innanzi, e non indarno:

chè l' imagine lor vie più m' asciuga,
che il male ond' io nel volto mi discarno.
La rigida giustizia, che mi fruga
tragge cagion del loco ov' io peccai
a metter più li miei sospiri in fuga.
Ivi è Romena, là dov' io falsai
la lega sigillata del Batista
per ch' io il corpo suso arso lasciai.
Ma s' io vedessi qui l' anima trista
di Guido o d'Alessandro o di lor frate,
per fonte Branda non darei la vista
.
Io son per lor tra sì fatta famiglia:
ei m' indussero a battere i fiorini,
Che avean ben tre carati di mondiglia." [1]

Though the actual perpetrator of the offence suffered a cruel death, the Counts themselves do not appear to have lost consequence by their misdeed, whatever doom

". look and attend
to the misery of Master Adam: when alive, I had enough of what I wished; and now, alas! I crave one little drop of water.
The rivulets that from the verdant hills of Casentino descend into the Arno, making their channels cool and moist,
Stand constantly before me, and not in vain: for the image of them dries me up far more than the disease which from my visage wears the flesh.
The rigid justice, which searches me, takes occasion from the place at which I sinned, to give my sighs a quicker flight.
There is Romena, where I falsified the alloy, sealed with the Baptist's image: for which on earth I left my body burnt.
But if I could see the miserable soul of Guido here, or of Alessandro, or their brother, for Branda's fount I would not give the sight.
.
Through them am I in such a crew: they induced me to stamp the florins that had three carats of alloy."

Inferno, C. xxx., Temple Classics trans.

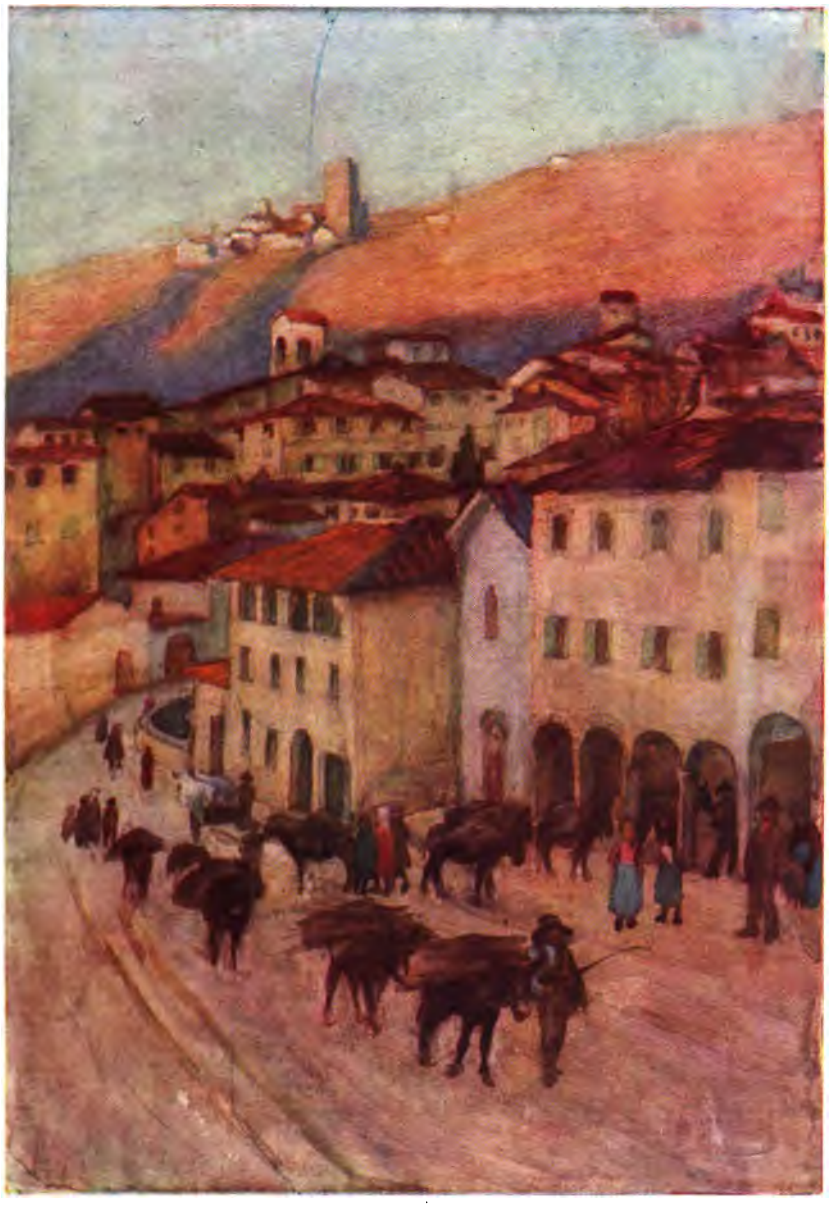
might be ultimately reserved for them by eternal justice. They regained the grace of the Republic before long, and served it afterwards in honourable commands.

But the change which a century had wrought in this great House is best shown by its attitude towards Henry VII., when he made his great expedition into Italy. Of the descendants of the Counts who had been some of the chief supporters of Barbarossa and Frederick II., only a few even welcomed the new Cæsar, and hardly one kept faith with him. Guido di Battifolle, though appealed to for aid by Henry's Queen, Margaret of Brabant, in some letters to his wife, the Countess Gherardesca, the answers to which are extant, sent troops instead to the support of Florence, and himself fought against the Emperor's adherents in the Casentino. Bandino and Aghinolfo of Romena joined the Imperial standard; the Bishop died at Henry's court in Pisa, and Aghinolfo remained faithful to him, only making peace later with Florence, long after death had defeated the Emperor's enterprise, and after having suffered a long imprisonment in the castle of the Count of Mangona, one of the allies of the Republic. The Counts of Porciano entertained the Emperor in Tegrimo's castle of San Godenzo, and were foremost among the magnates who swore faith to him there. But when his fortunes began to decline, all the brothers except Count Tancred abandoned him.

Tancred's loyalty proved disastrous to his House; it was rewarded by a diploma from Henry, investing

him with the lands of his unfaithful brothers, and the claims which he advanced on the strength of this document provoked a dreadful fratricidal warfare, which divided and consumed the energies of the family, and brought ruin and misery upon their lands and vassals. In the other branches of the House the necessity of dividing the possessions between several heirs wrought like feuds, destructive to property, honour and influence. Their increasing weakness exposed the Conti more and more to the greed of Florence. She possessed herself of one after another of their castles, by astutely encouraging the inhabitants to rebel, and then stepping in either to help them, or as mediator, in which case she usually managed to appropriate the disputed territory, sometimes generously compensating the rightful lord by a grant of money. During the fourteenth century the five lines descended from Guidoguerra and Gualdrada split up into many ramifications, always at feud with one another, and helping by mutual injuries to hasten the general decay of their House; and though still proudly styling themselves Counts Palatine, most of them were now little more than petty barons.

The quarrel in the Porciano branch ended in the almost complete ruin of the sons of Count Tegrimo, Guido Domestico and his brothers, who, in spite of desperate and valiant struggles, were driven out by their cousins, the fierce Guido Alberto and the other sons and grandsons of Count Tancred. The dis-



STIA, WITH PORCIANO IN THE DISTANCE.

possessed barons lodged themselves in one or two impregnable fastnesses among those naked rocks of the Romagna which one looks upon from the eastern wall of the Casentino, and thence swooped down upon their foes at intervals with swift and unexpected stroke. The usurpers did not enjoy their gains very long, for Florence compelled them to surrender many of the disputed castles to her, and they quickly fell out between themselves over the rest. But Count Guido Alberto was a powerful baron, and in consequence of his activity on the Ghibelline side was excommunicated by the Church, and repeatedly banned and proscribed by Florence. He outraged the Republic by compelling her ambassador, sent to summon him to appear before the Signoria for some offence, to kneel ignominiously before him, and swallow the missive, seal and all, despatching him back again with the curt warning that the next who came on such an errand should be hanged by the throat. He was finally murdered at the instigation of his nephews, who persecuted his widow and her children mercilessly afterwards. These in consequence put themselves under the protection of Florence, virtually surrendering their independence. Count Piero, who succeeded to Porciano, was besieged in the castle by his nephews and made prisoner, and was forced to confirm the inheritance to them after his death. He too was murdered by rebellious vassals, who attacked him in the castle of Urbech. His son Giovanni Fortuna

took the title of Count of Urbech, and he and his posterity, protected by Florence, remained in possession of this insignificant barony till the male line died out in 1501. Piero's nephew, Count Neri, succeeded to Porciano, and his line was extinguished in his son Lodovico, who became a monk of Camaldoli and relinquished all his rights to Florence.

A third offshoot of the Porciano Guidi, known as the Counts of Palagio, from a castle of that name close to Stia, came to an end more in keeping with their fierce ancestry. In the last years of the fourteenth century this barony had fallen to a Count Antonio, who in his youth was a gallant cavalier, and in the jousts which took place in Florence in 1392 to celebrate peace with Milan bore off the prize at the head of a party of knights accoutred all in white. But the wrongs which he and his house had suffered from the great Republic, which robbed them of their territories on the slightest protest, induced him to side with Milan when war broke out again later, and to prey upon Count Piero of Porciano and others of his kinsmen who remained faithful to Florence. But, after the death of his ally, Duke Gian Galeazzo of Milan, retribution fell swiftly upon him. The Republic sent troops secretly over the hills to the help of Count Piero of Porciano, and the incautious Antonio was surprised and surrounded in his castle, where he had a garrison of only ten men. He had no choice but to surrender, and was compelled to give up all his

territories to Florence, in order to purchase safety for himself and his family, with whom he departed into the obscurity of exile.

By this time much of the Casentino was already subject to Florence. The Counts of Dovadola, descended from Guido Salvatico, had early disappeared from the Valley, their castle and barony of Pratovecchio having been seized by the Republic at the beginning of the fourteenth century, probably as the consequence of Count Marcovaldo's support of the Florentine magnates in their quarrels with the *popolani* of the city. After the death, at a great age, of Aghinolfo of Romena, who was the only one of the false-coining brothers who apparently left heirs, the Republic profited by the quarrels of his grandsons over the heritage, to get possession of Romena and all the fiefs appertaining to it. The Counts still kept the title of Romena with a few scattered possessions in the lower part of the Valley, and as soldiers of fortune appear in the history of the time, most of them taking service with Milan against Florence in the wars between these two powers, and involving themselves in the same ruin which finally befell all that was left of the House in the fifteenth century.

There remain the two closely related lines of Bagno and Battifolle, descendants respectively of Guido Novello and Simone di Battifolle, and heirs of the bitter feud which had divided the two brothers. The Counts of Bagno, who after the disaster of Campaldino had much

sunk in consequence, waged for some years a petty desolating warfare against Guido di Battifolle, who held Poppi and the old territories which the two sires had possessed together. Federigo Novello, one of the sons of Guido Novello, was killed in an ambush laid for him by Guido Salvatico and Tancred of Porciano. Dante sees him praying with outstretched hands in Purgatory (C. vi., v. 17) among the violently slain who have repented at the last moment. His brother Guglielmo Novello, called Spadalunga, or Longsword, was a turbulent and desperate character, the terror of abbots and peaceable folk. He and his sons preyed upon the lands of Battifolle, burnt castles, laid ambuscades for their foes, and committed a hundred cruelties. In 1325 they concluded a peace in the church of Certomondo with the Counts of Battifolle, in which all the parties mutually pardoned all slaughters, robberies, and ravages of fire and sword committed upon one another. Three years later Guglielmo fell upon the castle of Romena, which was only saved by the intervention of Florence. Manfredi, another brother, was a notable Ghibelline warrior, and their nephew, a second Guido Novello, took an undistinguished part in the raids of his kinsmen. But, little by little, Florence, using force or bribery, wrested their few remaining castles from them. Galeotto Novello, son of William Longsword, alienated his vassals of San Niccolò and Strada by his cruel and dissolute conduct, and they revolted and gave themselves

to Florence. Count Marco of the next generation was obliged to cede Soci to the Republic, and the later members of this old Ghibelline race are lost to sight fighting for Milan against the power which had been their ruin.

The Counts of Battifolle alone of the Guidi continued powerful in the Valley into the middle of the fifteenth century. As steady Guelfs they enjoyed the friendship of Florence, and they were some of the most important of the allies whom she called to her side in the wars with Pisa and Lucca. Count Ugo and Count Simone, grandsons of the first Simone di Battifolle, took an important part in the affairs of the city. Nevertheless the Republic continued its encroachments, and sought every excuse for weakening their power and despoiling them of territory. The Guidi, pressed by powerful enemies in the great Ghibelline families of Arezzo and of the Val d'Arno, dared not protest. The Tarlati in especial had made themselves strong in the lower part of the Valley, and they actually seized and held for many years the stronghold of Fronzola, close above Poppi. Count Simone did great service to Florence by helping to rid her of the tyrant Duke of Athens in 1343, whom he carried off to the castle of Poppi, and there compelled him to ratify his abdication of the lordship of the city. In return the Republic gave Simone and his sons aid against the Tarlati, whom they finally drove out of Fronzola. The sons, Count Roberto and Count Carlo, found themselves compelled

nevertheless to renounce their old independence and to put their dominions under the protection of Florence, whose sovereignty they agreed to acknowledge by an annual offering of a *palio* or prize consisting of a piece of silk of a fixed value, for the jousts on the great Florentine feast-day of San Giovanni.

These two brothers were both great warriors, and Count Roberto is specially interesting because he was also a man of culture and learning. His great contemporary Petrarch sought his acquaintance, and addressed to him one of his grandiloquent epistles: "Many and magnificent things doth fame announce to me of thee, of thy studies and of thy manners, and greatly I rejoice because of them with thee and with thy native place. Nor let anyone call the regions desert or uncultivated where such men are born." The poet speaks of his longing to visit the hills of the Casentino, which neighbour Arezzo, the place of his birth; but since he cannot satisfy his desire, he prays the Count to think that he is ever with him there in spirit, "whether thou descend by the sylvan slopes of the mountains, or take thy seat upon the verdant lawns, or disport thyself along the grassy banks of thy native river, not yet infected by the corruption of the surrounding cities, or that it please thee to wander beneath the dense vault of the woods which shelter thee from the sun, or to rest thee in the chequered shade upon the margin of the springs and of the icy streams which temper the ardour of the celestial Lion. . . ."

Count Roberto answered in his best Latin, which is not, however, I believe, very classic. Having eulogised in hyperbolic terms the virtue of the poet and his generosity in turning his thoughts to a stranger, and discoursing to his ears sweet melody, he recalls Petrarch's expressions of affection for the Apennines, and marvels greatly that the poet abandons and flies his native place. "I wonder, above all, that thou hast never set thy steps on the Apennine hills, which burn with so great a longing to be touched by thy sacred feet, and especially in the Casentino and its confines, where there are so many sacred places of the Religious, where the sources of such great rivers are to be venerated. Here is the place of Alverna, as it were a deep grot hollowed out in the rock, within the mountain, with vast caverns not made by the hand of man but by Nature. Here is the holy hermitage of Camaldoli, within a grove of trees surpassing tall, which by the density of interwoven boughs hide the sight of the sky, and defend it from the torrid glance of Phœbus. Here is the sacred cœnobium of Vallombrosa, shut in within the deep shade of leafy valleys. Here is the source of the Arno. . . . Here the beginning of the horned Tiber[1]. . . . These with me desire and call

[1] Monte Fumaiolo, where the Tiber rises, is not in the Casentino, but a few miles beyond the eastern boundary, in the Romagna. It was at one time, however, widely believed that both Tiber and Arno rose in Falterona, though Dante, well acquainted with the Apennines, correctly places between them the *Crudo Sasso* of La Verna.

thee. For thou art not, as thou dost write, unknown to me, thou whose fame reaches unto the stars. . . . But I pray thee to bear me in mind, though thou see me not, and I will hold thee most dear as long as I live." The letter is written from Poppi and subscribed: "Thine, Count Robert of Battifolle."

Petrarch, in response to Count Roberto's effusion, greatly commends the baron's Latin and accomplishments, as shown in his letter, "so strewn with poetic and philosophic flowers." With a profound sigh from the depths of a broken heart, the poet explains how it is that he flees from his native regions: "It is not I that abandon my country, but she that keeps me from her." The Count, in a second letter, dated from Pratovecchio, modestly disclaims the poet's generous praise of his rude and uncultivated epistle, and reiterates his longing, now doubly ardent, to see his famous correspondent; he prays him not to be embittered by the ingratitude of his compatriots, assuring him that though they might neglect him absent, if he were present among them they would adore the "lofty majesty" of his learning.

How interesting is the reverence of the descendant of rude warriors for the noble gifts of the spirit as embodied in the great poet. The age which worshipped Petrarch as almost divine was indeed passing out of the mediæval tyranny of force. New and remarkable, also, is the attitude of poet and

baron towards Nature, testifying that the world was escaping from another bondage. A new relation of love and confidence has been established between man and the exterior world; he sees and rejoices in its beauties for their own sake. The mountains are no longer a mystic symbol of terror, the abode of danger for body and soul whence all who may flee into the cities. Civilisation has grown old and corrupt and he longs to return to the simplicity of the woods and streams. The modern spirit already stirs in these two fourteenth century characters, and the mediæval baron describes the famous places of the Casentino and their natural wonders and beauties almost from the point of view of a cicerone of to-day.

After Count Roberto's death the heritage was divided between his daughter Elisabetta and Count Carlo's son, Roberto Novello. The latter held Poppi, while Contessa Elisabetta reigned in her Castle of Borgo alla Collina, a mountain village two miles higher up the Valley. But she was allowed no peace, for her cousin of Poppi was determined to drive her out and unite her territories with his. He attacked and captured her castle, and carried her away a prisoner to Poppi, but Florence came to her rescue and forced him to give up his prey. Enraged at this intervention and at the continual spoliation which his House suffered from the Republic, Roberto abandoned the old political traditions of his fathers and allied himself with Milan, whereupon Florence sent an army

into the Casentino, surprised him, and took him prisoner and threw him into the Stinche. He made his peace after a while and was released, but again breaking his faith he was banned anew, and died miserably of pestilence in 1400, while in hiding in the lonely fortress of Castel Castagnaio.

In his son Francesco, the last of the Guidi, the House was to make one wild struggle for existence before it succumbed to destiny. The young Count was left by his father's death in the guardianship of Florence, and in early life served the city faithfully. But with time he developed all the rashness, energy and overbearing temper of the long line of mediæval tyrants from which he sprang. He governed his states despotically, persecuted abbots and monks, spared no tortures or oppression to gain his ends, and renewed his father's attacks upon the Contessa Elisabetta, till the poor lady was forced to relinquish her castle to Florence, and retire to the city. Blinded by ambition, Francesco provoked the wrath of Eugenius IV. by seizing upon Borgo San Sepolcro, which he claimed as the dowry of his daughter, widow of the condottiere, Niccolò Fortebraccio, to whom the Pope had granted that city in fief. The Casentino was invaded by the Papal troops, who besieged and captured many of the castles, and the Count was compelled to disgorge the Borgo in order to recover his own states, which were restored to him by the mediation of Florence, stripped, however, of

many of the rights and jurisdictions formerly appertaining to them. The Count, in whose heart the wrongs done to his House by the Republic rankled deeply, was now more fiercely embittered against it than ever. He cherished a special hatred towards the man who at this time was become supreme in Florence, Cosimo de' Medici, who had broken off a projected marriage between his son Piero and Francesco's daughter, Gualdrada. In 1440 war broke out again between Florence and Milan, and Niccolò Piccinino, at the head of the Milanese, invaded the territories of the Republic. The Count, driven by some headlong fury of self-destruction, invited the fierce condottiere into the Casentino, and Niccolò readily led his bands across the mountain barrier and gave the beautiful valley up to fire and the sword. Reinforced by Francesco and his followers, the Milanese attacked and captured the castles and villages belonging to Florence and slew all their inhabitants. The vindictive Count girdled the rocks with the dead bodies of the peasants. Vineyards, fields and pastures were trampled and wasted. But the end was at hand. Niccolò Piccinino, declaring that his horses could not eat stones, soon abandoned the Valley, and before long the Milanese were badly defeated by the Florentines at Anghiari, and Niccolò was compelled to retreat from Tuscany. The Count, who had fought with him at Anghiari, was left alone to face the reckoning. It came quickly. A Florentine

army, under Neri Capponi, was sent into the Casentino, and having promptly recaptured the lost castles, sat down before Poppi. Francesco, beleaguered with only a small garrison in this the little capital of his state, in the midst of the once vast dominions of his ancestors, which he himself had reduced to ashes, saw no hope anywhere. No help could be looked for from the vassals whom he had oppressed and estranged. Life was all that he could now save. Weary from long years of turbulence and passionate struggle, exhausted by despair, he gave up all resistance. He entered into treaty with his foes, and on agreeing to surrender all his territories and jurisdictions, was allowed to depart free, with his family and his household goods, to Bologna, where he spent the remainder of his life in obscurity.

So the Guidi pass from the Casentino. The end of the famous House, which had reigned there for five centuries, was catastrophic, as befitted their virile blood. After the fall of Count Francesco, the Valley passed wholly into the dominion of Florence. The other baronial families which had once had some hold in it, the Alberti, the Ubertini and the truculent Tarlati, were by now extinct or forgotten. Arezzo itself, once, in alliance with the Ghibelline Guidi, the formidable foe of Florence, was fallen into decay, and in 1366 had yielded itself for a sum to the great Guelf Republic.

Once again only the Casentino was disturbed by armed invasion. This was in 1498, when the Venetians

under Bartolommeo d'Alviano, in alliance with the party of the exiled Medici, made a sudden descent into the Valley, seizing the monastery of La Verna, and taking possession of Bibbiena through the treachery of the Dovizi and other inhabitants who favoured the Medici. Thanks to the stout resistance of Poppi, the strongest and most important place in the Valley, which he assaulted again and again without success, d'Alviano could make no further progress, and the Florentines were able to bring up forces to oppose him. The Casentino was now filled with armed men ; the two armies numbered 18,000 between them. Aided by the peasants, who preyed upon the invaders, the Florentine general, Vitello, gradually shut up the passes, cut off the enemy's supplies, and reduced them virtually to a state of siege in Bibbiena, where, as the winter came on and the mountains were covered with snow, they suffered considerably from want of supplies. Those that held La Verna were forced to retreat, but d'Alviano held on to Bibbiena, and it was not till an accord was made in the following year between Florence and Venice that he abandoned it and the Valley was released from the misery of warfare. The Florentines dismantled Bibbiena a few years later for her disloyalty, and the Casentino passed into the condition of peace and remoteness from the disturbances of life which it enjoys to this day.



THE PIAZZA, STIA

CHAPTER III

CASTLES OF THE GUIDI

"Chiefless castles breathing stern farewells.

.

And there they stand, as stands a lofty mind,
worn, but unstooping to the baser crowd,
all tenantless, save to the crannying wind."

On the hillside, above the ruined Castle of Porciano, grows a sorb tree, noted in the country for a remarkable echo which throws back with extraordinary clearness, from the wall of the old tower opposite, a sound uttered on this spot. A whole sentence will be repeated with the exact inflections of the speaker's voice, yet with an added plaintiveness, which seems to belong to some other being; some spirit, perhaps, imprisoned in those mouldering stones. It might be the lost spirit

of the past, still unburied and condemned to mock with idle repetition the million questions which we ask of it.

As you stand beneath the tree, with that enigmatical voice in your ears, and look down upon the pensive Valley below, stretching far away southwards, a hundred such mystic echoes are breathed back to you. Close by, upon a little rise, the jagged tower of Porciano fronts you, one-eyed and broken-fanged, like an old wolf, standing up dark and massive, flanked by the shattered walls of the castle, over the gorge of the unseen Arno. Beyond the river the steeps rise again, crowned farther down by the gaunt ruins of Romena, gigantic skeleton fingers pointing to the sky. More distant still, small stately Poppi hovers in the misty depths of the Valley, and far away Bibbiena may be just descried, a faint cloud speck against the blue pallor of the morning hills.

These towered heights, as one sees them in the early hours of the day, rising out of the river of mist which marks the winding course of the Arno, and sweeping away into the far distance between the long lines of the hills, remind one of those twilight times of the first Conti Guidi, when the castles held hands across the intervening valleys and represented an undivided strength and dominion. In their unbroken chain upon the river's flood they might stand as symbols of that ordered authority flowing from a divinely-appointed source, which a poet dreamed of



LOOKING DOWN THE VALLEY FROM PORCIANO.

once here in the Valley. But as they emerge with the increasing hours into distinctness and take form and substance from the sunlight and shadow we see them as it were in the clearer light of later history, sundered by party differences and fraternal hatred, and breathing anger and defiance at one another across the narrow ravines, a picture in little of the divided Italy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The eyries degenerate into nests of greedy carrion birds, the towers decay with their weakening lords, till now in the late afternoon of that historic day they appear empty, ruined, silent, the fleshless ribs of the grand old past.

But their tragic aspect only enhances the beauty and peacefulness of this forgotten place. Here beside the sorb, on this hillside turned to the south, you may bask at midday with the lizards in the sun, though the year is sloping to its winter, and already nights and mornings have a keen tooth. Beside you is a pleasant green lea, spread with a few sparse chestnut trees. Behind rise up the rocky pastures and forest-hung slopes of Falterona, and in front is the blue immensity of valley, mountain and sky. The ebb and flow of a quiet human life pulses in the silence. From the castle opposite a steep path winds down to a fountain hid in the hollow at our feet, and all day long women descend and ascend with pitchers in their hands or bundles of linen poised upon their heads, for they are washing at the well, and voices call down with that

sweet melancholy fall which carries the words as far as if they were song.

It is hard to think that this idyllic hamlet was once of some account in the world. Yet the ruined tower yonder represents the once redoubtable stronghold of those powerful barons, the Conti Guidi of Porciano, whose allegiance was an important element in the schemes and reckonings of an Emperor. The mountain paths were frequented then by ambassadors and knights and persons of importance, and travellers of all sorts. Wandering minstrels found their way to these Alpine regions, and rich merchants coming from the eastern ports with their strings of laden mules used to pass beneath the castle on their way to Florence and Pisa. The descendants of the Counts Palatine of Tuscany did not disdain to fall occasionally upon these last and relieve them of their wealth ; for in spite of their ancient name and possessions the Lords of Porciano seemed to have lacked *gentilezza*. One who knew them well likens them to the swine which fed in the oak forests of Falterona around their castle, for it can hardly be doubted that the poet of the *Divina Commedia* intends to indicate them with a savage play upon words in the famous lines :—

> "fra brutti porci più degni di galle
> che d'altro cibo fatto in uman uso."

Dante is believed to have stayed at Porciano at some period of his exile. The castle is situated

precisely *under the source of Arno*, the locality from which the poet dates his two great political epistles, written in 1311, though that somewhat vague indication might certainly apply to Romena or even to Poppi, and there are no means of deciding which place is meant. Be that as it may, the memory of the poet is the proudest and most living tradition of the old castle, while the traces of its arrogant lords are now scarcely heeded. Time's revenge! There is a popular legend that Dante was imprisoned here by the Counts. There seems to be no evidence of this, yet the tradition may have some foundation. It is easy to fancy that he may have scourged them somewhat freely with his scornful tongue for their lack of zeal and their selfish greed, and that they found it easier to silence him by the bolts and bars of their dungeons than by argument, little reckoning with whom they had to do, and that one day they would be proclaimed *porci* to all the world for all time. Such summary treatment of him might help to excuse the poet's scathing satire on his hosts, if their political vacillations and the disloyalty to the Emperor who was come to redeem Italy were not enough in his eyes to loose him from obligation for a hospitality embittered very likely by contempt and neglect.

Of the old stronghold little is left except the great tower and some remains of the towers and walls which surrounded the great court. A few peasants live now in rude dwellings, once part of the castle, and their

peaceful vines fill the enclosure where the baron's vassals used to assemble to follow him to battle, and where many a duel of play and of death has been fought. The remains of a great cistern which supplied the castle with water still exist beneath this court. Within the empty shell of the tower, which is pierced by many round-headed windows, traces of the old floors and chambers are plainly visible mounting upwards to the battlements, where the watchmen kept their look-out over hills and valleys for foes and for fat merchants. Fragments of the vaulting which once roofed the great hall still project from the walls, upon which remain traces of painted stucco. But for the rest the ground is a heap of fallen stones and rubbish, the old chambers which sheltered so many generations are open to wind and rain and the birds nest within them. Your heart aches as you think of the many generations of lives that have been rounded within this place, which now itself, unshaken by a thousand Apennine storms, nor split by all the human passion which it once contained, lives on in a Tithonus-like immortality of age and solitude.

A fine old gateway admits into the precincts of the castle, and outside, still enclosed within the original outer girdle of walls, is the village, as ancient as the tower itself, and hardly changed from the time when the inhabitants were serfs and retainers of the baron, a part of his "family." The only thing that is modern is the church, a plain, commonplace little

building, which contains an interesting triptych, an Annunciation with figures of SS. Raphael and James the Less on one side and SS. Margaret and John Evangelist on the other, and a predella with scenes from the legends of these saints. An inscription records that Count Neri of Modigliano (and Porciano) had it made in honour of the blessed Virgin and St. Raphael Archangel, 1408, and the arms of the Guidi of Porciano are in the corner of the predella. The colour is well preserved, and though without any special distinction the picture has the grace and charm and decorative qualities common to the early Tuscan painters. It is one of many productions of that prolific and artistic entity, *Ignoto Toscano*, which are to be found scattered throughout the Casentino, no doubt but a small residue, passed over by the modern collectors, of the many works of art with which the Guidi and the other great barons in the Valley once adorned the churches and monasteries.

Poised up here upon its hill Porciano held the little town of Stia, beneath, in subjection, with all the country round. But now life and activity have passed from the old corpse of feudalism to the wise little community which settled itself beside the rushing water below, and which from an insignificant handful of millers and sawyers and husbandmen, whose labour in peace and whose blood in war were claimed as tribute by their liege lord in the castle above, has grown into the flourishing little industrial town of to-day.

A rough causeway leads down to Stia from Porciano. Here we come upon another Dante legend. It is related that the Florentines, enraged by his denunciations of them in his epistles from the Casentino, sent an envoy to Porciano, to demand that the Counts should deliver him up to them. This individual, on his way up from Stia, encountered the poet himself descending; and not knowing who he was, inquired of him whether Dante Alighieri were in the castle. The answer was: "When I was there he was." At this the envoy continued on his way satisfied, and the poet hastened out of the reach of danger.

Stia is built along the right bank of the Staggia, a mountain torrent which comes down out of a ravine of the northern hills and joins the Arno just beyond the bridge at the bottom of the hill. Nothing could be sweeter and fresher than the air of this little mountain town, seated at the sources of streams, which refresh your ears all day and all night with the sound of their rushing. It is a town of Arcady, seeming to have only just emerged from the misty gorges, which pierce behind it deep into the primeval forest. Though its prosperity comes from the busy modern cloth mills which line the Staggia, Stia keeps a primitive gaiety and simplicity. The people themselves speak of it as *ridente;* an expressive word. There is one principal street, which descends the steep hill and widens out between arcaded houses into a piazza, in the midst of which stands a picturesque fountain. Some of the

narrow side alleys are ancient and picturesque, with their blackened stone houses, loggias and outside staircases, and you get a charming view from the bridge that crosses the Arno behind the town, where, above the green swirl of the stream, a cluster of irregular rusty-coloured stone buildings stands up upon a massive buttressed wall.

The church, which stands in the main street, is one of a very interesting group in the Casentino, popularly called the Churches of the Countess Matilda, who is said to have founded a hundred churches in Tuscany. It is more probable, however, that these in the Valley were built by the Guidi, who in the eleventh and twelfth centuries established many religious foundations, *for the remedy of their souls*, but it is quite possible that the *Grancontessa*, with whom the Counts were intimately associated, may have shared in the pious work. The other churches are those of Romena, Strada and Montemignaio, and perhaps the ruined Buiano may be classed with them. All alike are of Romanesque architecture and are basilicas in form, with massive columns and round-headed arches, and an apsidal east end, and have very remarkable capitals of the curious Composite style of the period, carved with animals and human figures, volutes and stiff foliage, in a rude, grotesque, angular manner, which shows, nevertheless, a good deal of vigour and animation. The designs are of symbolic import, to which the decorative purpose is quite subordinate. The church

at Stia has suffered from alterations of later date. An eighteenth century choir has been substituted for the original apse, and the old façade has been destroyed, and half the last bay of the nave cut off at some time in order to widen the street outside. The floor also has been raised so that the bases of the columns in the upper part are hidden. Otherwise the nave remains unspoilt, with its noble pillars. In richness and elaboration the capitals are finer here than in any of the sister churches. On one of them there is a woman's figure rising out of waves, which is, I think, a symbolic presentment of Eve. Another, with some decorative feeling, is an angel with great drooping wings. There are various other quaint and curious designs.



CAPITAL, STIA CHURCH

The same Count Neri who gave the triptych in Porciano church had an altar-piece painted by "a good master" in 1407 for Stia, which is probably the Assumption now placed in the chapel on the left hand of the choir. This is a striking picture, showing the Madonna seated in a quaint and unusual attitude on

clouds, surrounded by seraphim and dropping her girdle to St. Thomas, who kneels amid the Apostles below. The colour is richer and warmer than is customary with the Florentine primitives, and has something of the brilliance of early miniature painting. The gold background appears to have been repainted, and also some of the Apostles. In the chapel on the other side of the choir there is a little ciborium of Della Robbia majolica, an exquisite bit of Renaissance decoration, coloured white and blue, with delicate touches of pale green and yellow, and characteristically bordered with heavy garlands.

Besides these works of art in the church, there is to be seen at Stia, in the Municipio, a glazed half-length figure of the Madonna holding the Child, usually attributed to Andrea della Robbia. It is very much in the manner of that master, the Madonna being of the simple virginal type to which he has accustomed us, and the Babe posed in the same way as in many of his altar-pieces, but as a recent writer on the subject[1] points out, the character of the child's face and the comparative coarseness of the modelling betray the less distinguished hand of Andrea's son Giovanni. This beautiful and touching work used to be in a roadside shrine near the town, and was one of many such treasures that the Valley possessed; one comes across numberless old stone shrines now empty of their sacred images which have been carried to museums and private collections,

[1] Cruttwell, *Luca and Andrea della Robbia*, p. 228.

and no longer remain to protect the groves and fields. Many of them were doubtless glazed terra-cotta works of the Della Robbia, in whose characteristic productions some of the sanctuaries of the Casentino are still rich. Since these works have become of very great value, the open air tabernacles have suffered much from sacrilegious marauders. The Stia Madonna is badly cracked by the blows of robbers who were endeavouring on some occasion to force the statue from its shrine, but were fortunately surprised before they could carry out their attempt. There is, or was recently in a private house at Strada, a town a few miles from Stia, a polychromatic relief of the Della Robbia school which formerly occupied a shrine at the mountain village of Caiano. It was removed for safety to a chapel, but was stolen from there shortly afterwards, to be recovered later, in pieces, by a happy chance. A waggoner passing along the Consuma road detected it quite accidentally, hidden in a ditch. The adventures of this relief are typical of what many of these artistic treasures have suffered.

On the left bank of the Staggia, opposite the town, is the site of the vanished castle of the Conti Guidi of Palagio. Here lived the last Count of this line, Antonio, who oppressed the inhabitants of Stia, harried the lands and cattle of his kinsman, Count Piero of Porciano, and recklessly courted his ruin at the hands of Florence. After he had been driven out by Count Piero at the head of a large body of

troops sent by the Republic, his lands, consisting of Stia, Palagio, Papiano and a few other insignificant places, were constituted into a commune with the name of Palagio fiorentina. On the right bank, again, a little way above Stia, stands the old Castle of Urbech, where, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Count Piero of Porciano was besieged and murdered by rebellious vassals, and where his descendants, ousted from Porciano by their cousins, the sons of Count Tancred, kept up their diminished power and dignity under the title of Counts of Urbech. Stripped of power and possessions by Florence, family and castle together fell soon into insignificance and decay. A mass of grim stone buildings, with solid walls which tell of fighting days, set upon a little rise on the right bank of the Staggia, represents the old stronghold. A door of stately Renaissance form, traces of a pillared loggia long filled up, show that it was adapted later to the needs and tastes of more peaceful times. A wild legend of one of the last Counts still clings to the old place. It is said that one midnight, when a shameful orgy in which he had compelled all his vassals to take part was at its height, the castle was suddenly shaken by an awful thunderclap, and the devil himself appeared in terrific guise and carried off the guilty lord bodily from the midst of the trembling revellers. So popular legend weaves the memory of sudden Apennine storms and of old sins and

calamity into a moral fable. Now the fierce, dissolute barons and their descendants of the stately sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are succeeded by a colony of peasants, who shelter themselves and their sheep and asses in the dark stone chambers, and are as unaware of ghosts as birds in an ancient tower of the generations that have nested there before them; and the old feudal stronghold looks down upon ugly modern factories built just below it.

The road winds steeply up to the castle, and passing it, divides a little further on. The left-hand path soon turns into a mule track, leading up by stony ways to the ancient village of Papiano, which consists of scattered groups of dwellings clinging to the sunny hillside, each surrounded by vineyards and terraced fields, beneath the high Alps that defend them on the north. On the right the road pursues its way deep into the gorge of the restless Staggia, winding past rocky knolls, where a few lean sheep crop here and there among the stones, herded by barefooted peasant girls, and enters presently into the deep forest, among the grey gnarled limbs of secular chestnut trees, where the sound of hidden water running far below seems the very voice of the sylvan silence. Nothing meets you except perhaps a solitary girl with kerchiefed head and calm, curious eyes, slowly jogging along upon a donkey; unless it be the time when the great timber sleds, each drawn by four yoke of oxen, come down in slow pro-

cession from above, with cracking of whips and noise of merry voices. After a time you come to Gaviserri, once a castle of the Guidi, and now quite swallowed up in woodland, with only a lonely church remaining. The place seemed utterly abandoned when we visited it last autumn; even the Canonica adjoining the church was empty, and in the tiny desolate graveyard opposite the last priest of the parish lay among the scanty dead beneath the snow. We asked why another had not been appointed in his place, and were told that the church must be *vedova* for a year and three days before it could have a new priest. I do not know the meaning of this strange custom, but certainly no place could have seemed more widowed than Gaviserri that day.

Within the church, a bare, modernised little building, there is a large altar-piece in better preservation than most of the Casentino pictures, although badly cracked in two places; the Madonna and Child, with SS. John Baptist and Clement, Bartholomew and Anthony. One is startled to find a work of so much beauty and dignity in this solitary place. The enthroned Virgin, gazing with gentle bent head upon the Child, the grave figures of saints—St. John with his poetic head and the deep, pondering countenance of the grey-bearded Anthony—have a deeply impressive effect in the empty church, where the silence is filled with the rustle of the forest and the monotonous sound of the stream rising from far below. In a gallery herded

with a hundred others it would doubtless lose much of its distinction, but it is in any case the work of no mean artist.[1] A charming little sculptured ciborium of fifteenth century Florentine workmanship is also to be seen here.

The road continues on its lonely way from Gaviserri, following up the narrow gorge of a side stream and burrowing even deeper into the mountains towards the dark pine woods of Campigny, which curtain the precipitous ravines further up. At Campigny there is a busy colony of woodcutters, and there the road ends. But a rough path leads on upwards through the forest and brings you after about an hour to the top of the ridge, where there is a magnificent view over the Casentino on one side and the mountains of the Alta Romagna on the other.

About two miles from Stia, further up the Arno, stands the interesting Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. A road leads thither, passing by on the right, just after leaving Stia, a little oratorio which contains a small picture of some merit. It is a half-length Madonna in dark draperies, with a background of roses against a pale blue sky; the Child has been spoilt by repainting. It is probably early sixteenth century. Further on, the road passes an old building, now a farmhouse, but connected at one time with the Hospital

[1] A distinguished art critic, judging from a photograph, tells me that this interesting picture must be by one of the youngest generation of Verrocchio's pupils, some fellow-pupil of Lorenzo di Credi.

of Sta. Maria Nuova at Florence. It has a picturesque loggia with some faded sixteenth century frescoes.

But the pleasantest way to Sta. Maria delle Grazie is by the river, through enchanting green meadows and groves of pale-stemmed poplars, with the cool rush and ripple of the stream beside one; a path which has a strange charm in the evening twilight, when the woods grow pallid and the colour fades from the pastures and only the white bed of the river gleams, tinged with the sombre glow from the flocks of crimson seraphim deepening and darkening in the zenith, and you seem to be walking into the unknown regions of the gloomy mountains which tower up behind, shutting in the Valley.

The church stands high up on the hillside overhanging the gorge of the river; you know it far off by the spire of dark cypresses which rises behind it. It is impressive to find in this solitary place, surrounded by oak forests, a treasure-house of art, such as this little sanctuary, a votive offering to God of man's best, consecrating the wild places. Sta. Maria delle Grazie claims a miraculous origin. In 1428, when pestilence was raging in the Casentino and all the crops were perishing because of continuous rain and storms, a poor woman, called Monna Giovanna, was one day hoeing on this spot, when the Virgin appeared to her, and promising that the rain should cease, bade her go and tell the people to build a church in that place. But when Monna

Giovanna hastened to Stia and told the Piovano of the wonderful vision he would not believe her, and, weeping, she returned to the field, where the Virgin again appeared, and giving her a lighted torch, bade her go again with it to the Piovano. And though the wind blew furiously, the flame of the torch remained tranquil and steady while she carried it to Stia, where the priest, overcome with awe at the marvel, accorded her this time full credence. The church was built by his efforts and those of Count Neri of Porciano, assisted by the alms of the devout, and became a noted sanctuary, whither the country people crowded to seek protection for their flocks and fields. It was burnt down before long, and the present building was raised by the authorities of the Hospital of Sta. Maria Nuova of Florence, to whom the land belonged. The emblem of the hospital, a crutch, is carved over the west door. At the end of the seventeenth century it passed into the possession of the monks of Vallombrosa, who built a monastery beside it, which was called Vallombrosella, and is now the priest's house.

The little church is not architecturally remarkable, but it has a fine choir of Renaissance form, flanked with pilasters with charming arabesques and richly decorated with Della Robbia work. Round the cornice runs a frieze of cherubs, very charming in effect, though there is little difference or individuality in the baby heads, and they look rather as if cast from a mould. In the corners are medallions with well-



SANTA MARIA DELLE GRAZIE.

modelled figures of the four Evangelists, white upon blue, and a lunette-shaped recess on either side is filled with an elaborate polychromatic relief of the same glazed terra-cotta work. The one on the left hand represents the vision of Monna Giovanna. A Madonna of somewhat homely type sits surrounded by cherubim, and below kneels the poor peasant woman, a very touching figure in her nun-like dress, her lean and elderly face transfigured by devotion. S. Giovanni Gualberto kneels on the other side, and behind appears the shepherd Pietro, who, according to the legend, saw the light of the miraculous apparition while feeding his flock at a distance. The lunette opposite is a Nativity, with a singularly sweet and graceful Madonna. Both pieces have elaborate landscape details, and it is interesting to note that the oak and chestnut trees of the neighbourhood are introduced into them. Chestnuts too are worked into the thick woven garlands which enframe them, and in which there are also snakes and all sorts of little decorative animals of the woods and fields, and each has an inner border of cherubs, which are modelled with much more care and show much more character than those of the frieze. The colour of both is rich and subdued, the workmanship good, and regarded merely as decoration they have much beauty, and though of course such work, which is a kind of bastard between sculpture and painting, cannot be looked upon as the highest art, it has a peculiar charm of its own. Under-

neath each lunette runs a line of blue tiles, with a legend now almost effaced, but on the Nativity side the numeral letters MCCCCC. may be distinguished. The seats fitted in below the lunettes are of a good period and are inlaid with narrow patterns. Over the stone altar, which is of the late fifteenth century, there is a very attractive little picture — a Madonna and Saints —conventional in style and feeling, but painted with extreme delicacy and finish and in an excellent state of preservation, a Florentine work of the fifteenth century. The little shrine with fluted marble pilasters in front of the altar guards the fragment of rock upon which the Virgin stood when she appeared to Monna Giovanna.

In the body of the church there are two paintings of interest. That on the north side is a fresco of the Madonna, attended by angels, with a small half-length figure of the donor kneeling beneath, and an inscription with the date 1485. In colour and arrangement, and in the treatment of the draperies, this has a suggestion of Ghirlandaio. Over the door opposite hangs a tavola of the Madonna and little St. John adoring the Babe, a pleasing little picture, but coarsely painted. Nor do these exhaust the list of treasures, for beneath an altar, on the left-hand side, may be seen a delightful little Della Robbia Annunciation, full of grace, and there is also a holy water stoup by the same school, charmingly ornamented with coloured flowers and fruits.

Opposite Sta. Maria and nearer to the head of the Valley the old ruin of Castel Castagnaio with its

cloven tower is seen ridging a lofty spur. Though there is little of interest left there now, the walk thither is very charming, and is typical of the wooded hill country which surrounds Stia. You cross the river beneath the church, where there is a fine new bridge building. But till it is finished you must do as folks have done for thousands of years, spring across upon a plank unsteadily set upon the stones in the bed of the stream. Or if you go barefoot, in Casentinese fashion, you may wade through the shallow water, but take care that your feet be as brave and hard as a saint's, for the stones are very sharp. The chestnut woods begin on the other side, and you climb up and up the steep hill-side, and passing through a gap in the rocks at the top of the ridge, find yourself on the verge of a narrow valley completely enclosed within the thickly-wooded slopes of the mountains. The loud singing of a stream rises up from far below, and you look across to Castel Castagnaio, seated upon the opposite height above the russet curtains of the forest like some peacock with sweeping, gorgeous tail, or majestic head of an aged queen rising out of the vast folds of her falling robes. The Castle of the Chestnut Forest indeed! One seems to have wandered into a romance or fairy tale, so apart from reality, so remote and lost in time, is this place. In the dreamy silence one listens for the sound of Sir Tristram's horn, or pictures Sir Percival slowly winding his way up to yonder mysterious tower. That mystic white stag that haunts enchanted springs and leads

hunters to strange adventures should appear in some pale mossy glade between these ancient trees, that stand around with trunks and limbs blanched in the pallid winter sunshine. Except in dream there is little company in the forest. Among the gaunt and mutilated stumps, blasted by many a storm, nothing stirs. Now and again a single twitter of a bird is heard. Where the russet shroud of leaves is broken by a green open space you may chance to hear a knocking, and come upon an old man splitting logs beside a little stone house with smoke rising from beneath its roof, a *seccatoio* where chestnuts are being dried. Or round a turn in the path will come a string of patient mules with great sacks of charcoal laid across their backs, followed by a charcoal burner with swarthy, blackened face, who bids you good morrow with the friendliest of smiles and perhaps lingers a moment to ask you whence you come and whither you are going. Or a trim maiden comes by, basket on arm, and stops to examine you with wondering eyes as you rest a while on a fallen trunk, and to question you with the freedom and curiosity of a primitive age, telling you in return all about herself and her sick mother in the woodcutter's cottage far above and her errand to fetch the medicine at Stia or some such simple tale.

The path descends gradually to the level of the stream, where there is a little space of delicate green mead, scattered over with slender poplars, a fit setting for some idyll of the Golden Age. Then mounting

up again on the other side, you gradually approach the castle. Signs of life appear in the woods. A meagre flock of sheep are cropping the few sweet grasses that spring up between the boulders; pigs scamper down the steep; the solitary song of a herd girl flows through the trees as continuously as the rustle of the brook below. A steep, winding causeway leads up to the Keep between the grim stone dwellings where the vassals of the Conti Guidi used to live and where now their descendants lead the same primitive existence. The old stronghold occupies the crown of the hill, thrust out over the gorge, and, beneath, the ground is terraced up with a succession of walls, from which it falls precipitously to a great depth. Nothing is left of the tower except one huge gaping fragment of masonry; the courtyard, beneath which the old cistern still exists, is now a green plateau. Castel Castagnaio, one of the most ancient of the Guidi strongholds, belonged, after the division of the dominions, to the Counts of Romena, and later to those of Battifolle. It was never of much importance, but afforded a remote and impregnable refuge in times of danger. It formed part of the dowry of the Contessa Elisabetta of Borgo alla Collina, and was wrested from her by Count Roberto of Poppi. Later on the Count himself was forced to take refuge here from the vengeance of Florence, after fighting for Milan against the Republic, and being seized with the plague he died here in 1400. The castle passed into the possession of Florence with the rest of the Casentino in 1440.

But the chief interest of Castel Castagnaio to-day is the view. You look across over the falling woods of the gorge and the silver stream far below to the blue slopes of the hills beyond and the great chain of the high Apennines, sweeping from the rounded crest of Falterona along the fretted ridges to where La Verna appears, a dark shape poised far away in the south-east. As Count Roberto lay dying up here, with all the scene of the former greatness and present calamity of his House spread out before him, the Rock where he and his mighty ancestors had knelt and done homage to the messenger of a joy beyond all worldly power and possession must have been the consoling vision upon which his eyes closed for the last time.



GAVISERRI



PIEVE, ROMENA

CHAPTER IV

PRATOVECCHIO AND ROMENA

" . . . ; the ruined wall
stands when its wind-worn battlements are gone."

THE main road down the Valley from Stia leads after a short mile to the little town of Pratovecchio. Here was once a strong and important castle of the Guidi. On the death of Guidoguerra II. it became the seat of his widow, the Countess Imilia, who founded a convent of Camaldolense nuns here for her daughter, the Abbess Sofia, the masterful lady who as we have seen ruled all the country round from her monastic palace as regent for her young nephew, Guidoguerra IV. The castle fell to the share of the Conti Guidi of Dovadola in the subsequent division of the family dominions, and it must

have been here that Dante stayed with Count Guido Salvatico, if we may accept Boccaccio's account of that baron's hospitality to the exile. Whether true or not, the belief that it once sheltered the divine poet is the chief pride of the little town. After being confiscated from the Counts of Dovadola by Florence, in the fourteenth century, Pratovecchio appears to have been joined later to the jurisdictions of the Conti Guidi of Poppi, from whom it was definitely wrested in 1440 by the Republic. It is now a good deal modernised. But it has remains of the walls and towers of its feudal past, and the porticoed streets, striped with sunshine and shadow, are full of the picturesque colour and charm of the gay Italian life.[1]

Beside the river stands the ancient convent of the Abbess Sofia, which still keeps its pale, white-robed inmates, who live strictly cloistered within their high walls, dead to the world. They are all, I believe, ladies of noble family, but the once rich and splendid community has been stripped of its wealth, and all the artistic treasures which it used to possess have had to be sold. There is also a convent of Dominican nuns in the town, who are called the Monache Nuove, while those of the more ancient foundation are called the Monache Vecchie.

Just beyond the town one comes to the old Badia of Poppiena, where there were monks even before the

[1] The inn at Pratovecchio, kept by Oreste Spigliantini, is a comfortable resting-place. The rooms are large and airy, especially those at the top of the house, and the cooking is good.



COBBLERS AT PRATORECCHIO.

foundation of the Abbess Sofia's convent. But they have long vanished, and the church, which has a picturesque campanile, has been altered from its old form. Its only interest is an early fifteenth century picture of much charm and beauty, hanging in the choir, behind the high altar, an Annunciation, in bad condition, but preserving still to a great degree the fine miniature-like colouring and the brilliance of the gold. The figures, especially that of the angel, are notable for grace. While keeping to the conventionally idealistic treatment of the later Giottesques, the picture shows something of the new life which the more realistic painters of the period were imparting to Florentine art. It has been claimed by a recent critic[1] as the work of Giovanni del Ponte, an interesting painter of that time in Florence.[2]

There are two or three delightful mule paths from Pratovecchio through the woods and over the hills to Camaldoli. One way leads up the course of a little torrent called the Fiumicello, past the hamlet of Valiano, where there is a Pietà of Giottesque style in the little church, to Casalino, and thence up and up the bare and stony hillside almost to the top of the long ridge of the Giogana. After a walk of three hours or so, you descend through thick pine woods to the Sacro Eremo.

[1] See the *Rassegna d'Arte*, Anno iv., No. 12, Dec. 1904.

[2] An altar-piece formerly, in the church at Poppiena, is now in the National Gallery, where, on account of its place of origin, it is attributed to Jacopo Landini, a fourteenth century painter belonging to Pratovecchio. The writer mentioned above, however, pronounces this also to be by Giovanni del Ponte.

Another path starts from Poppiena and goes up through idyllic groves of chestnut trees, and across an open moor, and then descends into the deep hollow where Moggiona lies, an ancient castle once of some importance and mentioned in a royal diploma of 933. There is nothing left of the castle, and the village is of little interest. From Moggiona the path climbs up again till the high road is reached, and after a short distance, you arrive at the old monastery of Camaldoli.

Opposite Pratovecchio, on the right bank of the Arno, the hill of Romena rises abruptly from the water's edge and lifts its skeleton castle into the sky. Of all the ruined strongholds of the Casentino, Romena has the most tragic aspect. The stricken towers, rearing themselves above the parched terraces that circle the hill beneath, seem to tell, not of time's slow decay, but of some sudden destruction fallen upon them for their sins. It is as if the heat of the illicit fires in which Maestro Adamo coined the false florins for the wicked Counts had seared the stones of the castle. From everywhere in the Valley the gaunt towers are conspicuous, standing up alien and apart, not sharing alike with the rest of the Valley in the sweet influences of the light and air. If on a clear day there be but one little cloud in the sky, Romena will be black beneath it amid the golden and purple glory around. But when the Valley rests under a soft shadow, the towers stand up pallid on their peak, like un-

tranquil ghosts. Again, on stormy days, they will appear above the rolling drifts of cloud, fired by a reflection from some unseen gleam of the lurid day. And in the evening dusk, when the sky quickens into a beauty of rose, and the hills to the east are warm and golden, Romena grows dark alone, the sullen towers scarcely reflecting the western splendour, and unkindled by any beam of candle within.

It is a long steep climb up to the Castle. The path at first is pleasantly shaded by chestnut trees, but as you approach the summit it becomes bare and stony, flanked only by a few scanty olives and thin vines, as it winds without the encircling walls of the stronghold. The Castle, set upon the crest and verge of the hill, must have been of great strength and size. It is said to have been defended by fourteen towers. One lofty tower still stands guarding the southern end of the great court or piazza, and at the north end rises the huge and massive Torre del Mastio, the last and innermost defence and refuge in times of siege. It rears itself above an inner enclosure, where the palace of the Counts stood, and which is entered through a lower tower, once separated from the piazza by a moat and drawbridge. Some of the palace chambers still remain, altered, however, by the various Podestàs who occupied the castle after it had fallen into the hands of Florence. The shields of some of these governors moulder on the walls. An ancient cistern exists beneath this inner Keep, and there was once a subterranean passage by

which the tower might be reached from the outer enclosure. The curious may also discover traces of dungeons and oubliettes.

On the precipitous slopes of the hill below the remains of the many circles of walls may be seen. The outermost was half a mile in circumference, and a hundred families were once housed within the citadel, within which there was also an hospital. Two ruined gateways are visible on the north side, and the ancient-looking farmhouse beneath the castle on the south was once the Podesteria, or court of justice.

This is all that is left of the home of the great Counts Palatine. The pleasant grass grows over the traces of Guido, Alessandro and their brother, who live on nevertheless for ever in the poet's terrible judgment roll. Perhaps, if we could read what was written long ago on the ground, we might discover here the lost footprints of the exile himself. There can be little doubt that Dante stayed at Romena or was at least acquainted with the place; that he climbed the hill and perhaps slaked his thirst himself at Fonte Branda below. He must have been thrown much into contact with Alessandro and Aghinolfo da Romena at the time that he was actively engaged in the affairs of the Bianchi, whose cause both brothers zealously adopted, and is likely enough to have been their guest. Perhaps here in the society of these descendants of mighty sires he may have been led to the philosophic meditations on the fallacy of deriving *gentilezza* from *antica ricchezza*,



ROMENA FROM THE FIUMICELLO.

which he expounds in the *Convivio*. As he remembers the Counts in his great poem later only to damn them out of the mouth of Maestro Adamo, it is to be supposed that, if he did experience their hospitality, the obligation for it must have been wiped out afterwards by personal wrongs or by treachery on their part towards his political ideals.

But however unworthy the disposition of its lords may have been, the hill-top of Romena was a fit abode for the lofty thought of a poet. Though the castle walls are fallen now, the scene remains the same as then. Lifted up into the great concave of blue, you look down upon the emerald plain patterned by the shining coils of the river, and away over castles and villages to the girdling ranges of purple forest and silver rock and golden cloud. What a place at night this would be for one whose meditation was upon the significances of the heavenly spheres!

Just below the castle on the path down to the tiny hamlet you pass by Fonte Branda. The spring, with this famous name, by which it appears always to have been known, is now but a tiny trickle issuing from the hillside beneath a ruined stone archway. There can be little doubt, considering its position close to the earthly abode of Maestro Adamo, that it is this Fonte Branda, and not the fountain at Siena, which the false coiner recalls amid the tortures of the Inferno.

Some half mile further down stands the splendid old Pieve, which is the best example of the so-called

Countess Matilda's churches in the Valley, as it was very carefully restored in 1893 and the accretions of later times were cleared away. It stands on the slope of the hill among the fields like some sanctuary in a mediæval romance which an errant knight comes upon unawares in a forest. Its solitary position gives it peculiar charm, and the effect of the noble exterior rising in pallid stone, fretted with rich shadows within a setting of green, is very beautiful. The semicircular east end, ribbed with columns and pierced by round-headed windows, with delicate pillars dividing the lights, has been touched only here and there by the restorer, and the crumbling state of the stone gives picturesqueness to the rich and simple contours. The sculptured work of the capitals has unfortunately almost completely perished. The interior is very noble and impressive, and is quite free from florid and tawdry ornament and adjuncts. The original proportions are however now lost owing to the destruction at some time of the two last bays of the nave. In its complete form the church must have been singularly long and narrow. The capitals are like those at Stia, and some of the same figures occur here, as the snarling beast with head turned round and tail curled over his back, and a curious design of a human head and feet, with draperies or wings, perhaps intended for a seraph. An inscription upon the last column on the south side: *Tempore famis* MCLII. (in the time of the famine 1152), apparently alludes to the building

of the church, unless it be the date of a restoration. Upon the corresponding capital opposite one reads: *Henricus* (?) *Plebanus fecit*, also with a date in the twelfth century. The four faces of this capital represent the mystical Foundation of the Church, under the figures of Christ committing the keys to Peter, the sons of Zebedee fishing, and the four Evangelic Beasts. The graceful pattern of grapes, with birds plucking at them, upon the abacus, doubtless signifies Christ as the Vine. A capital in the west wall shows a very grotesque Adam and Eve, and another column has a winged and feathered being on all the four faces of the capital, carrying on its head now a cross, now a creature with a long tail and four legs ending in claws, now a bird with a human head, while four grotesques form the angles. One would fain be a Daniel to read these mysterious characters of mediæval religious art. I was told that the particular form of cross worked repeatedly into the ornamentation is the cross of St. Agatha, the protectress of the fields from storms and unfavourable weather. These sculptures are in wonderful preservation, the thick coating of whitewash which had been



CAPITAL, ROMENA CHURCH

spread over it and over the arches and the walls above for centuries till 1893 having protected the work so well that it looks as if it had been cut yesterday.

The remains of an older church may be traced in the present building: part of the original masonry is built into the north wall, and the broken bases of two old columns are embedded in the steps of the sanctuary. The crypt is also part of the first church. Its walls are in good preservation, and it contains the remains of the old stone altar and the bases of the columns which once supported the vaulted roof.

In the restoration of 1893 the floor of the church, which had been raised till almost level with the sanctuary, was lowered to the original level, and the hidden bases of the columns were uncovered, and the stonework of them was renewed where it had decayed away. A wall which crossed the church from the belfry down to the corresponding door on the south side, dividing it into an upper part for the clergy and a lower for the people, was removed at the same time. There are one or two mediæval pictures in the church. An early Madonna and Child upon the left-hand wall, and on the opposite side, part of a triptych of Giottesque style, fourteenth century, the Madonna and Child, with SS. Peter and Paul below, the first with his hand upon the kneeling figure of the donor, perhaps one of the Guidi, whose head has a good deal of individuality, though the work otherwise is quite conventional. On a side panel are depicted St. John



INTERIOR OF ROMENA CHURCH.

Baptist and St. Anthony. On the same wall hangs a fifteenth century painting of much interest, which has suffered terribly from decay. Faded as it is, however, the Madonna, with her fair face, deep-lidded eyes, and the slender, wistful Child upon her knee, keep their old grace and charm, and one can still appreciate something of the dignity of the saints grouped around her throne. The work is very reminiscent of the school of Domenico Veneziano and his followers.

Romena on this side of the hill has a different and gentler aspect. Around and beyond the church there are woods and cool green glades scored by rocky water-courses, and the air is full of the rustling of hidden streams.

> "li ruscelletti, che dai verdi colli
> del Casentin discendon giuso in Arno,
> facendo lor canali freddi e molli."

It is in this guise that his earthly dwelling-place haunts the burning vision of Maestro Adamo in Hell and sharpens his intolerable longing. To pass from the mere terrestrial ardours of the hill-top at noonday into the chequered shade and rest on the margin of one of these rushing brooks is a sensation which brings home to one very vividly the cruelty of the fate meted out by "rigid justice," as interpreted by the poet, to the man who had sought to defraud the sacred seal of the Baptist of its truth and honour.

A pleasant path from Romena leads through the

woods and over a hill to Borgo alla Collina. Another and even more delightful way to the same place keeps upon the slope of the hill over the Arno, now ascending, now descending, to the edge of the rippling water, which spreads out here in shallow quiet pools, or narrows into a swift current, curling within a wide shingly bed, as it flows towards the towered hill of Poppi.



CAPITAL, ROMENA CHURCH



POPPI CASTLE

CHAPTER V

THE CASTLES OF THE WESTERN VALLEYS

"What I love best in all the world
Is a castle precipice encurled,
In a gash of the wind-grieved Apennine."

BORGO ALLA COLLINA, through which the high road from the Casentino over the Consuma passes, is delightfully situated on a low ridge between the plain of the Arno and the entrance to a deep valley which runs far back into the western hills and is watered by the Solano, a tributary of the Arno. Borgo was once a "castello" like its neighbours. The great vaulted portal which bestrides the road and gives beneath its black shadow a glimpse of the flagged street and

porticoed houses beyond is a survival from mediæval days, and the weather-beaten old building above is still called the palace, though it has lost all its grandeur. The place was used by the Counts as a pleasure-house or hunting lodge, but it was the chief castle of the Contessa Elisabetta di Battifolle at the end of the fourteenth century, and underwent then some perilous vicissitudes, being besieged and taken by Count Roberto Novello of Poppi, who, as we have seen, carried his cousin a prisoner to his castle. After she had been released and her castle restored to her by the intervention of Florence, she had still to be on her guard against her cruel kinsman, who now sought to kill her by subtlety, so that she hardly dared stir out of her stronghold. One day when she ventured forth to the chase in the forest which then spread all round Borgo she was assailed by a shower of arrows which actually pierced her garments, but thanks to the speed of her good horse she succeeded in escaping. This feud between these two close neighbours and kinsfolk brought misery on the country round. Elisabetta's husband, Giovanni Gabrielli, a soldier of fortune, revenged her wrongs by sacking the Count of Poppi's lands and carrying off much spoil. But in the end Elisabetta was compelled by the continued persecutions of her cousin to abandon her castle to the care of Florence and retreat to the city, where she lived in a palace granted her by the Republic, in company with another refugee, the Contessa Caterina, widow of one

of the later Counts of Romena. This lady and her children had been cruelly used by the Conti Guidi of Bagno, who had burnt their castle of Montegranelli in the Romagna and made them prisoners, and after they had been once rescued, had again tried to seize them, and had only been prevented by the intervention of Florence. There is a legend that this lady, after many adventures, had been miraculously delivered out of their hands by the archangel Raphael. This throws light on an interesting old altar-piece, now hanging in the choir of the big new church at Borgo, whence it was removed from the old parish church near the gate. The picture, which has been very badly used by a would-be restorer, depicts the marriage of St. Catherine, with saints grouped on either side; the figures, graceful and decorative in arrangement, are of the small-headed, long and slender type with which one is familiar in the works of some of the primitive Tuscans. Among the quaint representations in the predella beneath there is a little scene of an angel leading forth a cloaked figure from a gateway. This can be no other than the Contessa Caterina being delivered from captivity by the angel Raphael. The picture bears the inscription: *Domina Comitissa Elisabeth de Battifolle* MCCCXXIII. *die primo Augusti*, and there can be little doubt I think that it was a thank-offering from Elisabetta for the safety of her friend and kinswoman. The date is an obvious mistake for 1423, at which time the donor was living, and not a hundred years earlier; the style of the work

also shows it to belong to the later period. One of the numerals may perhaps have been dropped out at some restoration.

After Borgo had fallen into the possession of Florence, the palace was conferred upon one of the secretaries of the Republic, Cristoforo Landino, who had been a tutor of Lorenzo de' Medici, and was a member of the famous Medicean circle of humanists and philosophers. He is best known as the author of a commentary on the *Divina Commedia.* Cristoforo belonged to an ancient Casentinese family, and Borgo was his native place. His body, unconsumed by time, lies in the church. By a strange irony it was long regarded by the simple villagers with great reverence as the miraculously preserved remains of a saint, till one day a learned tourist, the Frenchman Ampère, intent on the traces of Dante, came along and read the inscription upon the tomb, and joined the mummy once again to the memory of its rightful owner, the platonic philosopher. He tells the story in his *Voyage Dantesque*, adding that as he went away he could not help smiling at such an unexpected and symbolical meeting: "Everywhere, in the character of the places, in the memories, I had found the spirit of Dante living still, and here I found the corpse of his commentator."

Borgo alla Collina is a delightful place to stop in. There is a comfortable pension in the village, with rooms opening on to a terrace, commanding an incom-



Borgo alla Collina.

parable view of the Valley.[1] Here you may sit all day satisfied, while before your eyes the wonderful drama of sun and shadow is played out over the historic scenes around. You may see the diverse effects upon the spectral towers of Romena to the left, and upon gracious Poppi to the right; watch the day quicken and the night fall over the contemplative Rock in the east, and observe the swift changing moods of lofty Falterona to the north, and the great ranges that radiate from it. All day and all night the song of the Arno rises from the fields below. The hill upon which the village is set is bathed by both streams, the Arno on one side, the Solano on the other, and the pleasant slopes, clothed with vineyards, run down to idyllic green places beside the water, whither the children lead the sheep to pasture and the great white oxen come down to drink, stepping between the slender stems of the poplars on the bank. Here in the hot summer days the air is cooled by the breath of the rippling water which has issued so lately from the high ravines. On the opposite side of the Solano the chestnut woods begin, rising up to the little mountain chapel of Filetto and spreading away for miles, a shady wilderness in which to hide from what Petrarch calls "the celestial ardour of the Lion." Here indeed may be tested all those mountain delights which

[1] This house, belonging to Padre Fabbri, is very convenient for either a short or a long stay. The needs of English visitors are thoroughly understood. Italian is always spoken, but English is forthcoming for those who do not know the language of the country.

the poet long ago would fain have shared with Count Roberto of Battifolle.

Just beyond Borgo a tall wooden cross stands where four roads meet. Here, in an open space looking down on either valley, a fair is held twice a year. The road to the left plunges down into the valley of the Solano, which pierces like a gulf into the deep misty folds of the western hills. Below in its depths lies the little town of Strada, and upon the mountain side above hangs Castel San Niccolò with its gloomy tower and keep. This castle was in the fourteenth century the stronghold of the fierce Ghibellines Guglielmo Spadalunga and his son Galeotto Novello, who spent their energies in preying upon their kinsmen of the Guelf party. Galeotto made himself so odious to his people by his cruelty and licentiousness that they rebelled against him and drove him out of the castle and surrendered it to Florence. The Count was put under the ban of the Republic, which took possession of his domains and constituted them into a commune called the Montagna Fiorentina, of which San Niccolò was the chief place. In 1440 the castle suffered a terrible siege from Count Francesco of Poppi and the Milanese, who, after it had resisted for thirty-two days, took it by storm, and revenged themselves cruelly on the defenders, crushing them to death with missiles hurled from catapults as they strove to escape, and hanging all that fell into their hands. Count Francesco slew with his own hand an old woman, the sole creature found still alive and

still defiant in the innermost keep, when at last he and his soldiers broke in. When Florence reconquered the Valley and finally swept away the Guidi, San Niccolò was dismantled, with the other mountain strongholds, which could now serve no purpose but to harbour rebels or robbers.

Strada, or Vado, as the village below was sometimes called, there being a ford here, consisted once only of the church and a few poor dwellings of peasants. It is now a populous little town, extending some way along the left bank of the Solano. The old Pieve, like the church at Stia, is encrusted with the additions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and disfigured by side altars and tawdry ornamentation, but it has not been altered structurally, and the nave is complete with its seven bays and has a fine effect of length. The pillars are lower and smaller than those of Romena, and their loftiness is also lessened by the floor being raised and hiding the bases. They have the same kind of capitals as in the other churches, volutes and stiff flat acanthus leaves, ram's heads, and a marvellous assemblage of strange and monstrous figures, among which may be noted a rude representation of Christ and St. Thomas; on another column there is a hunting scene, showing a delightfully quaint little horseman on one face of the capital, and a lion on the next, symbolic of the soul warring against evil.

But interesting as are these fantastic symbols of faith and dogma carved upon the columns, the most devout

decoration, if one may so call it, is lent by the living figures to be seen in all these churches, the bowed heads of old men or simple shawled forms of women that kneel motionless beside the great pillars, and in the perfect unconscious grace of their attitude are outward signs of that meek and suppliant spirit without which no temple built with hands has its true significance.



CAPITAL, STRADA CHURCH

The castle steep rises abruptly on the other side of the Solano, opposite the town. You cross the swift-running stream by a picturesque bridge and ascend a zigzag mule path cut in the rock. No place in the Casentino gives a better impression of a feudal stronghold than San Niccolò. The arched gateway flanked by a bell tower, the steep flagged path, the primitive stone hovels with their dark and cavernous interiors, the little piazza, the ruined chapel with noble frescoed figures of saints fading on the walls inside, the old Palazzo di Ragione, or justice hall, plastered outside with mouldering stone shields, and used now as a stable for sheep, the Keep crowning the rock above with its walls and gateways and massive tower, all these things have suffered little change in five centuries, save the effects of time and weather. The ancient hags with eldritch locks, grasping distaffs, the barefoot

children in many-coloured rags that swarm around the visitor differ hardly more from the serfs that peopled it in the days of the Guidi. Only a long sleep has fallen upon the place. Between the outer and inner ramparts of the castle vines now grow and make a border of delicate green beneath the rusted wall, and all down the steep which falls away on every side, where the fierce *masnadieri* once swarmed up with fire and sword, the grapes grow slowly purple undisturbed upon the scanty vines. Nothing comes to break the quiet except the storms which sweep down through the curtain of chestnut forest behind from the high ridges of the Pratomagno.

The castle is entered through a portal beneath lofty walls which show remains of noble Gothic windows, and a steep path leads up through another gateway into the courtyard. There is a picturesque fountain here, and beneath is the old cistern of the castle. Some stone escutcheons of the Florentine castellans who succeeded the Guidi are on the walls. The great tower rises on one side, and its ruined chambers may be reached and entered by a perilous ladder which the custodian of the castle sets up for the visitor. In one of the inhabited rooms below there is a fine sixteenth century chimney-piece. For the rest, the dwelling of the formidable William Longsword and the dissolute Galeotto is roofless, desolate and silent.

The road from Strada up the Valley follows the

green poplar-edged banks of the Solano, passing through the adjacent village of Prato di Strada to the picturesque little hamlet of Rifiglio clustered beneath the hill. Here it divides, and one branch follows up a side valley on the right beside the torrent of the Rifiglio, passing the idyllic mountain village of Caiano, where the women sit and spin on their doorsteps in the sunshine, and climbs up to the moory wastes of the Consuma, inhabited only by hawks and roamed over by scanty flocks of sheep, where it joins the solitary high road between the Casentino and Florence. The other branch of the road keeps on along the banks of the Solano and passes beneath a great mountain rampart which thrusts itself forward into the deep gorge of the stream. This is the hill of Battifolle, and upon its verge, suspended over the abyss, stood the castle of that name, which signifies literally a rampart. Nothing remains now of the mighty masonry with which the Guidi built up this natural stronghold, except a green mound entombing the ruins, upon which trees grow and sheep nibble. But it is well worth while to climb the winding path from below, or to take the longer way through the woods from Ponte a Caiano, if only for the sensation of standing on that great height and tasting the wonderful peace and aloofness of it in this quiet evening of its life. Moreover, one is perhaps following in the footsteps of San Francesco, who is said to have mounted up here once when journeying across the mountains from

Florence to La Verna, and during his stay in the castle to have restored sight to a blind man. I remember when we were there how a full-voiced peasant woman from the little homestead which stands on the top of the hill led us to an ancient well of very pure water, which springs beneath a ruined stone vault, the only relic of the old castle. She told us that the spring is perennial, and never sinks below the same level even in the hottest summer. Bending down, she filled a great copper vessel which she had brought with her. We paused there upon the verge of the hill and looked down into the depth, seeking the far-off glint of the stream. The afternoon was hot and dreamy, and shadow already filled the gorges. From the misty ridges of the Pratomagno on our right range upon range of hills coursed steeply down into the shadowy valley beneath us. Riding among their multitudinous waves yet another castle was in sight, Montemignaio, set still further back in the mountains. And far away in the south-east, where all the light from the western sky now fell, the distant hills beyond the main Valley appeared transfigured, like shapes of rosy flame. In their midst rose the Rock of La Verna, the most conspicuous point in the horizon still, as long ago for the ferocious Simone di Battifolle. Strange that there is hardly a fastness in the Casentino, set however far back in the mountains, to which that Eye does not pierce, hardly a cavern in which the rash and angry souls might hide themselves

from that reminder of peace, of the Cross, of Heaven.

Upon the mountain side further up the gorge of the Solano lies Cetica, to be reached by climbing up from the picturesque village of Paglericcio, past the quainter and still more primitive Pratoluttoli, with its narrow street of irregular, blackened dwellings, and proceeding onwards for miles through enchanting chestnut woods. Cetica, which was once a possession of the Guidi, has three churches and separate villages—San Pancrazio, Sta. Maria and San Michele Archangelo. Sta. Maria contains an early Tuscan triptych, a Madonna and Saints upon a gold background, and San Michele has a real treasure in a small fifteenth century picture of the Madonna and Child, of a good school, but sadly damaged by the flames of the candles on the altar. The Virgin has a face of unusual type. Far above, upon the lofty side of the Pratomagno, just beyond the point where the chestnut trees, growing fewer and scantier, cease, and the slopes become rocky and sterile, is the Bagno di Cetica, whither the peasants come in the summer season from far and near for the sake of the healing virtue of its water. The properties of these springs were known in very remote times, but the simple folk attribute them to San Romolo, who is said to have bathed here when he was passing one day. Ascending still higher, the traveller reaches at last the top of the Pratomagno, and by a pass called the Varco della Madonna, may, if he will, emerge out

of the Valley Enclosed and descend on the other side into the Val d'Arno.

Montemignaio, the most inaccessible of all the castles of the Casentino, is built upon a height overhanging the Scheggia, a stream which comes down from the Consuma and joins the Solano at Paglericcio, whence there is a mule path leading to it along the hillside above the Scheggia. There is also a road practicable for vehicles, but very roundabout. It turns off from the high road over the Consuma about a mile before reaching the village of that name and follows a mountain stream across wild moorlands, gradually descending into a narrow valley hung with chestnut woods. At the bottom a little torrent flows down from a rocky ravine on the right, and just where it falls into the larger stream there stands a lonely church, called the Madonna delle Calle.[1] In a sort of rock-dwelling adjoining it there lives a hermit, who takes care of the church. Nothing could be more appropriate than to come across such a being in this solitude of forest and stream. The hermit is never seen, unless it be sometimes at dusk, when you may chance to see, creeping along the road, a strange black figure in garments of a shape belonging to some past age, stooping beneath a sack, and will be told that it is the *romitino*, who is going round gathering scraps from the pious. And occasionally it may happen that persons hiding from

[1] Calle are the big white Madonna lilies.

justice in the mountains will beat at the door of his cell and compel him to give them food. He had a celebrated predecessor here in the eighteenth century, a certain wealthy Count who abandoned family and possessions, and hid himself for forty-two years in this wilderness, living in the utmost austerity and revealing his identity to no one until the day of his death.

A little way beyond the church the clustered buildings and tall tower of Montemignaio suddenly appear above, against the sky, and mounting between the chestnut trees, you reach the castle hill and look down over sweeping woods into another valley, with several little hamlets hanging on the slopes and forming quite a community hidden away here in these Alpine recesses. The Pieve stands some little way down the hill, below the Castle. It has been well restored quite lately, and the exterior is almost entirely new. Within it is of the same simple and impressive form as the other Matilda churches, but the pillars of the lower half are square, and are covered with faded frescoes of a much later date than the building, charming enough in effect, but quite poor in themselves. The capitals of the round pillars are of the characteristic type, only less elaborate than in the sister churches, and if possible ruder and more grotesque. The High Altar is supported on little columns, which have capitals sculptured in low relief with devices characteristic of the Romanesque period, and there is an ancient semi-circular font against the wall, within a

high niche bordered with sculptured designs. A rather poor terra-cotta piece of the late Della Robbia school —a Madonna and Child with SS. Anthony and Sebastian, and a predella showing the Entombment and St. Francis receiving the Stigmata—has lately been removed into the church from the wayside shrine which it originally occupied.

The Castle, which used to be called Castiglione, that is, Castle of the Lion, was part of the inheritance of Guido Novello and his fierce progeny Guglielmo Spadalunga and the rest. It was united to the Commune of the Montagna Fiorentina in 1440. The great tower and a lofty fragment of the old wall of the keep stand up still amid the huddle of rude stone houses around. What remains of the old cortile and palace is now inhabited by peasants and is scarcely recognisable. You may glance through a low portico and an open door into some dark-beamed, oak-panelled chamber, where an ancient hag will probably be preparing polenta of chestnut meal for the family, or catch a glimpse of another kitchen, in which a carved stone cinquecento chimneypiece frames the blackened cauldron and the poor fire of sticks. There is the usual cistern beneath the court, and another subterranean reservoir connected with the castle exists in perfect preservation under the recently built office of the Municipality. It is a vast vaulted stone chamber, with walls thirteen feet thick and supported by a great pillar in the midst. In the old days the moat could be supplied from it.

But now moat, ramparts and outworks are all gone. It is with idle menace that the broken stronghold stands out over the gorge above the tremendous plunge of the precipice and looks down over the great knees of the hills to the spur where Battifolle, once the lair of hated kinsmen, is marked now by a green mound only. And far away beyond the opening of the Valley, lifted upon those visionary mountains of the afternoon, La Verna appears again, couched in the eastern sky, as in those long past centuries when it lay waiting patiently, while the eagles preyed upon each other, for the appointed moment when it should send forth its voice into the valleys.





THE FIELD OF CAMPALDINO

CHAPTER VI

POPPI AND CAMPALDINO

"But when I stood beneath the fresh green tree,
.
and saw around me the wide field revive
with fruits and fertile promise, and the Spring
come forth her work of gladness to contrive,
with all her reckless birds upon the wing,
I turned from all she brought to those she could not bring."

Poppi, the chief stronghold of the Casentino in the Middle Ages, *Pupium agri Clusentini caput* in Vasari's inscription beneath his fresco of the town in the Palazzo Vecchio at Florence, is built upon a hill that rises midway down the Valley, on the right bank of the river. It commands all the plain up and down, challenging Romena on the north and Bibbiena on the south. Wherever one may be in the Valley, this queenly

little town occupies the centre of vision. It is the type of all the castles of the Casentino, each of which, though it may consist of only a few poor stone houses, is piled up around its ancient tower with such an effect of grace and strength, and is so perfectly contained within itself, that it has the dignity of an ideal city. Each, too, has a population which, however small, still keeps from mediæval days the sense of a separate and distinct entity, with a strong local pride and patriotism.

Poppi, unlike Romena, lends herself to all the changing aspects of the day. No place puts on so much the glamour of atmospheric effect as this little white and green city with the tall brown tower. In the early morning you see her throned in an ocean of mist, shadowy, ethereal, a thing not based on earth. With the sunlight she assumes reality, and throughout the day changes from gold to amethyst beneath the passing clouds. But evening brings the deepest enchantment; then, in the purple twilight, she glimmers, ringed with ivory palaces, in the lap of the dusky hills.

As you near the town by the high road from Pratovecchio you pass by the old Franciscan church and monastery of Certomondo, or *Cerromondo*, as the people often call it. In the church, which late restorations have robbed of any architectural beauty it may once have possessed, there are some interesting frescoes. One on the south wall, bearing the date 1373, represents the Madonna and Child, with a saint on either hand,



POPPI.

colossal and imposing figures. On the opposite wall is a large and dignified composition showing St. Francis in glory with three angels above his head, representing the three vows. Poverty has a wreath of green in her hands. Below the saint, on his left hand, kneel San Bernardino and Sta. Chiara, together with a Pope and another nun; the corresponding figures on his other side have perished through decay, from which the whole work has greatly suffered. Behind the altar there is an Annunciation by Neri di Bicci, showing all his characteristics of primness, stiffness and polish, but rich and decorative in effect.

The church and monastery, which is now suppressed, were founded for the Friars Minor by Guido Novello and Simone di Battifolle in 1262 in thanksgiving for the Ghibelline victory of Montaperti, and were by a strange coincidence destined to be the scene of a battle in which the fortunes of Montaperti were completely reversed. For the peaceful level of vineyards and fields which stretches round Certomondo, beneath the walls of Poppi, is one of the graveyards of history. It is the famous field of Campaldino, where Guelfs and Ghibellines met in deadly combat on June 11th, the day of St. Barnabas, 1289. The story of this great day has been related at length by the Florentine chroniclers. A great host of Florentines and armed men from the allied cities of Tuscany, commanded by Messer Amerigo di Narbona, had descended into the Valley over the mountain of the Consuma, and had laid

waste all the lands of Count Guido Novello, then Podestà of Arezzo. Hearing of their coming, the valiant Bishop of Arezzo, Guglielmino degli Ubertini, had gathered together his forces, and supported by the Guidi, and by Buonconte da Montefeltro and the flower of the Ghibelline chivalry of Italy, had come forth to meet them. On coming into sight of each other beneath Poppi both armies drew up in order of battle, with the *feditori* (those appointed to make the first attack) ranged in the front rank. These chosen warriors were led on the Florentine side by Messer Vieri de' Cerchi, who with his sons and kinsmen had elected to occupy this post of danger; and numbered among them was the young Dante Alighieri, as he himself relates in a letter cited by his biographer Leonardo Bruni. The Aretini, who numbered only 800 horsemen to the 1600 of the opposing army, and 8000 foot soldiers against 10,000, nevertheless laughed their plebeian foes to scorn, and their *feditori* rushed upon the Guelf host with such impetuosity that in the shock most of the Florentine horsemen were unseated, and their whole army recoiled. But recovering themselves they stood firm again and a fierce struggle followed. The Florentine arrows rained upon the adventurous Aretini and the air grew dark with clouds of dust, and great numbers were slain in the *mêlée*. "Many that day who were esteemed to be of great prowess did cowardly, and many of whom none spoke won great repute," says

the chronicler Dino Compagni. Corso Donati, at the head of a band which he had held in reserve, fell upon the flank of the Ghibellines, who began to give way. Seeing this, Guido Novello, who had kept aloof from the strife, vilely abandoned his allies, and belying all his great repute for valour, fled with his people into his castle of Poppi, and there, in base inaction, awaited his inevitable fate. And in the end the Aretini were completely routed by the greater numbers of their enemy, and put to flight and slain. Bishop Guglielmino, who according to Villani had been plotting against his own friends and knew that his life was not safe from their vengeance if he survived, put spurs to his horse, and rushing into the thickest crowd of the foe, fell by the hand of a common soldier. His body is said to have been laid in a wayside chapel, from which it was uprooted later by the vindictive order of Florence, and was carried away by the pious friars of Certomondo in the secrecy of the night to bury within their precincts.

More famous is the fate of Buonconte da Montefeltro, the splendid young Ghibelline chief who lay at the time of the battle under the papal curse. He fled from the field with a mortal hurt and was never seen again. But the mystery of his end dwelt in the mind of one present on that day, and in the Antepurgatorio of his Vision the poet finds the lost warrior again among the late repentant who have died in contumacy against the Church. Unsped by the prayer of wife or

kin, he is wearing out the thirty times multiplied length of the years which he spent rebellious on earth ere he is admitted to purgation. Thus he reveals himself and tells his tale to Dante :—

"Io fui di Montefeltro, io son Buonconte ;
Giovanna, o altri, non ha di me cura :
per ch' io vo tra costor con bassa fronte."
Ed io a lui : "Qual forza o qual ventura
ti traviò sì fuor di Campaldino
che non si seppe mai tua sepoltura ?"
"Oh," rispos' egli, "a piè del Casentino
traversa un' acqua che ha nome l'Archiano,
che sopra l'Ermo nasce in Apennino.
Dove il vocabol suo diventa vano
arriva' io forato nella gola,
fuggendo a piede e sanguinando il piano.
Quivi perdei la vista, e la parola
nel nome di Maria finii ; e quivi
caddi, e rimase la mia carne sola.
Io dirò il vero, e tu il ridi' tra i vivi ;
l'angel di Dio mi prese, e quel d'inferno
gridava : ' O tu del ciel, perchè mi privi ?
Tu te ne porti di costui l'eterno
per una lagrimetta che il mi toglie ;
ma io farò dell' altro altro governo.'
Ben sai come nell' aere si raccoglie
quell' umido vapor, che in acqua riede
tosto che sale dove il freddo il coglie.
Giunse quel mal voler, che pur mal chiede,
con l'intelletto, e mosse il fummo e il vento
per la virtù, che sua natura diede.
Indi la valle, come il dì fu spento,
da Pratomagno al gran giogo coperse
di nebbia, e il ciel di sopra fece intento
sì che il pregno aere in acqua si converse :

Poppi and Campaldino

la pioggia cadde, ed ai fossati venne
di lei ciò che la terra non sofferse ;
e come a' rivi grandi si convenne,
ver lo fiume real tanto veloce
si ruinò, che nulla la ritenne.
Lo corpo mio gelato in su la foce
trovò l'Archian rubesto ; e quel sospinse
nell' Arno, e sciolse al mio petto la croce,
ch' io fei di me quando il dolor mi vinse ;
voltommi per le ripe e per lo fondo,
poi di sua preda mi coperse e cinse." [1]

[1] "I was of Montefeltro, I am Buonconte ; Giovanna, or any other, hath no care for me ; wherefore I go among these, with downcast brow."

And I to him : "What violence or what chance made thee stray so far from Campaldino, that thy burial-place ne'er was known ?"

"Oh," answered he, "at Casentino's foot a stream crosses, which is named Archiano, and rises in the Apennines above the Hermitage.

There where its name is lost, did I arrive, pierced in the throat, flying on foot, and bloodying the plain.

There lost I vision, and ended my words upon the name of Mary ; and there fell I, and my flesh alone was left.

I will speak sooth, and do thou re-speak it among the living : the angel of God took me and one from Hell cried : 'O thou from Heaven, wherefore robbest thou me ?

Thou bearest hence the eternal part of this man, for one little tear that snatches him from me ; but with the other will I deal in other fashion.'

Thou knowest how in the air that damp vapour gathers, which turns again to water soon as it ascends where the cold condenses it.

He united that evil will, which seeks ill only, with intellect, and stirred the mist and wind by the power which his nature gave.

Then when day was spent, he covered the valley from Pratomagno to the great mountain chain with mist, and the sky above made lowering

These verses remain the most poignant and most enduring memorial of Campaldino; rounding the awful human tragedy of the day with the terror of the mountains and the floods—with the overwhelming power of those mysteriously moved forces of Nature amid which his little torch of faith is man's only safety. And the littleness of it in time, the quick recurrence of the green springing years bringing new hope and life to those left behind on earth, is told in that saddest word of the forgotten spirit: "Giovanna, o altri, non ha di me cura."

You may follow to-day the course of the dying Ghibelline warrior over the fields once sprinkled with his blood to his place of death. Or if you take the high road towards Bibbiena and turn off about three miles beyond Poppi at the bridge which crosses the Archiano, and keep along the edge of the stream between the slender ranks of the poplars, you will quickly reach the spot where it loses itself and its *vocabol* in Arno. As a rule the Archiano is no more than a shallow rivulet, rippling merrily into the fuller current

So that the saturated air was turned to water: the rain fell, and to the water-rills came what of it the earth endured not;
And as it united into great torrents, so swiftly it rushed towards the royal stream, that naught held it back.
My frozen body at its mouth the raging Archian found, and swept it into the Arno, and loosed the cross on my breast,
Which I made of me when pain o'ercame me: it rolled me along its banks and over its bed, then covered and wrapped me with its spoils."—*Purgatorio*, C. v., vv. 88-130, Temple Classics Ed.



THE ARCHIANO WHERE IT FLOWS INTO THE ARNO.

of the "royal river." In the summer, when the rocky crannies where the hermits nest far aloft are parched and moistureless, it shrinks to a mere trickle. But the great tongue of shingly beach which runs out just at the meeting of the streams tells its tale of swollen waters. Here on the whitened stones one sits and thinks of that blind stumble, the gasp of Mary's name, the fall in the sweating moment before the breaking of the storm. Then the sudden loosing of the rains, the down rush of the spate that nothing could hold in, the rigid body swept into the Arno, its arms unclasped, tossed over and over by shore and deep, and buried and wound at last in the drift of weeds and mud.

At all times this is a lonely and meditative place. To-day a solitary peasant guides his oxen in the field close by, and stops to watch the stranger passing. We are in December. The water flows dark and quiet, contained within its narrow channel. A white fog lies upon the tree tops and everything is very still. But up there on the unseen heights the north wind is already unchained, and will tear up the shroud an hour hence, and toss up the great billows into the wild blue, ready for the morrow's snowstorm. But when summer comes again, six months hence, with its sudden clouds, the nightingales, hidden in that grove of trees, now leafless and dim, beside the water's edge, will be singing the lament of Buonconte, loud and piercingly, as on that June evening long ago when the storm had passed away, and all the heavy odours, loosened by rain

from grass and weeds, will float up like incense on a dead man's grave. At no moment of the year can the place be other than sad.

We have far over-passed Poppi and must return on our steps. But before ascending to the Castle, there is another reminiscence of Campaldino to be related, the authority for which is that inimitable chronicler of anecdotes, Franco Sacchetti. Many years after the battle, on a day in March, two ladies, riding together for diversion, chanced to pass by Certomondo. One was the Lady Gherardesca, daughter of Conte Ugolino della Gherardesca, and wife of Guido di Battifolle; the other Manentessa, daughter of Buonconte da Montefeltro, and married to Conte Guido Salvatico. Their conversation is an interesting example of party spite, translated from men's swords to women's tongues. "Oh, Madonna," said the daughter of the Guelf chief who had been starved to death in the Hunger Tower of Pisa to the daughter of the Ghibelline leader who had been slain at Campaldino, "look how fine is this grain and this grass here where the Ghibellines were overthrown by the Florentines. I am sure that the soil still feels that fatness." And Buonconte's daughter quickly replied: "Fine is it in good sooth; but we might die of hunger ere we had it to eat."

These loving kinswomen, as they returned to Poppi, must have crossed the bridge which is said to have been built by Count Guidoguerra a century before their time, and which still spans the Arno with

its picturesque and hoary arches, beneath the town. The suburb on the left bank, Ponte a Poppi, is an ancient growth, but is uninteresting and most squalid. Its houses have been a good deal modernised. Little else is changed since the Countesses rode across with their hawks and pages. On a bright morning the water would have danced and sparkled in its stony bed just as it does to-day, and the bare-legged women who kneel and wash in the stream or cross the strand balancing bundles on their heads had ancestresses in the fourteenth century who did just the same. The same steep flagged path ascends between the houses and is seen above the lower roofs, winding up to where the hill-top is ridged with churches and habitations, overtopped by the towering Castle. But one misses to-day in the setting of ancient walls, of rusty roofs and grass-grown slopes, the brilliant colour and splendour of the mediæval figures. No more processions of proud horsemen pass up and down. But the place is alive with memories of some of the most thrilling moments in the story of the Conti Guidi. Over the bridge and up the causeway clattered that recreant "County Guy," Guido Novello, fleeing from the slaughter of Campaldino below. Up here in 1343 the courteous Simone di Battifolle conducted the fallen Duke of Athens to choose between humiliation or a dungeon in the tower above. But most tragic of all was that last scene in the story of the Guidi when Count Francesco, having looked out from his castle upon

the Florentine army stretched out below in a great half moon, reaching from Certomondo to Fronzola, descended to the bridge to treat with its commander, Neri Capponi, who has himself related the story.

"'Can it be,' said the Count, 'that your Signory will not leave me this dwelling, which has been ours for 900 years. Do as you will with the rest.' I answered him: 'Do not imagine it. You have not borne yourself in such wise that my Signory wish to have you as a neighbour. They would be very willing that you should be a great lord in Germany.' He angrily replied: 'And I should like to have you there.' Whereat I laughed." So amid the scorn of the citizen victors for the arrogant pretensions of this relic of feudalism, the last of the Guidi was compelled to surrender possessions, castle, everything, even the consolation of revenge upon two prisoners whom he was keeping in a dungeon at Pratovecchio and would have conveyed secretly away with him, had not Neri discovered and rescued them. Then came the final scene when, accompanied by his family and retainers, and followed by a mournful procession of thirty mules bearing the scanty remains of his wealth, the Count descended the hill for the last time and passed out of the home of his fathers for ever.

The hill-top is still encircled by the remains of the old walls and defences built by Simone di Battifolle in 1261, when he and Guido Novello ruled here together, and which were so strong that they resisted the repeated



POPPI, FROM THE RIVER.

attacks of d'Alviano in 1490 and thus saved the Casentino from falling altogether into the power of the Venetian invaders. You enter through an ancient gateway, which is defended by the ruins of a massive bastion and by a tall bell-tower. Just within the gate is the Abbey of S. Fedele, founded by the Conti Guidi in the twelfth century for monks of the Vallombrosan Order. It was originally a dependency of the great Abbey of Strumi, which lay about half a mile away to the north of Poppi, and which enjoyed at one time great wealth and importance. Strumi produced, not a Pope indeed, but an anti-Pope, John of Strumi, the Abbot, being promoted to that ambiguous honour by Frederick Barbarossa. But the new monastery at Poppi flourished at the expense of the mother house; Strumi fell into decay and the monks finally abandoned it and transferred themselves to S. Fedele, and nothing is now left of the original abbey but some fragments of old building used as a farmhouse. Nor does the daughter monastery exist any more, having been long ago suppressed. The church is a large building, restored in the eighteenth century; the altar-pieces it contains are of little interest, with the exception of a large Madonna and Child, of the pre-Giottesque period, exceedingly stiff and unnatural, but noble in feeling and design, especially in comparison with the two vulgar seventeenth or eighteenth century figures of saints, between which the ancient panel is most incongruously fitted. There is also a large painted crucifix

of the fourteenth century. Andrea del Sarto was painting an Assumption for this church when he died; his widow, the fair-haired woman with the inexpressive face whom he has portrayed for us, was paid seventy lire for it, the price stipulated by the monks. The picture has now passed to Florence. Many of the Conti Guidi were buried in the cloisters of the adjoining monastery, but their tombs were destroyed by order of Pius V.

Poppi loses on closer acquaintance the enchantment which distance lends it. But it is a picturesque enough little hill town. The long main street lined with arcaded houses, between which narrow, black-browed alleys run steeply down the hillside, leads to the central piazza and the seventeenth century oratory of the Madonna del Morbo, built to commemorate the liberation of the town from two dreadful visitations of the plague. It contains a very sacred picture of the Madonna, which is said to possess the gift of healing, and is kept strictly veiled; it has no artistic value. The ugly Church of the Propositura, San Marco, on the left, has nothing in it of interest. The church of the Augustine nuns, beneath the castle on the east side, contains a very charming example of the polychromatic terra-cotta work of the later Della Robbia school. It is a Nativity; the Virgin, and St. Joseph adoring the Babe, with St. Francis and another Franciscan saint kneeling on either side in front. The shepherds, with their crooks and lambs, are entering on the scene behind, and in the distance they are seen

again with their flocks listening to the angelic message. A wreath of dancing angels, small figures, appears upon a cloud above the stable. The sentiment of the whole scene is sweet and touching, and the little subjects in the predella below, divided by pilasters decorated with rich arabesques in white on a blue ground, are enchantingly graceful, more particularly the Annunciation and the Salutation. The subdued colour of the whole piece is very decorative; there is none of that gaudiness which is so disagreeable in some of these polychromatic reliefs. Another work of the same school, the Madonna giving her girdle to St. Thomas, used to be on the front of a house just below the gate of the town; it has now however been removed, but is, I believe, to be placed in the castle. The town possesses a library of considerable value, consisting partly of the old library of the monks at Camaldoli, and containing some illuminated manuscripts and a number of early printed books.

The Castle stands on a rise above the town, on the verge of the hill, whence its lofty tower dominates all the country round. It is a splendid and imposing building, and remains to-day a witness to the power and opulence of the great Conti Guidi. It was built by the brothers Guido Novello and Simone di Battifolle, who lived in it in great magnificence, so that the expression became proverbial in Florence: *Tu stai piu ad agio che'l conte in Poppi.*[1] Whilst he was

[1] "You live in greater ease than the Count in Poppi."

vicar in Florence, Guido Novello stripped the city of its arms and harness of war and carried them hither and furnished his castle with them, as well as with all those taken from the Guelfs at the battle of Montaperti. Villani relates that one day the Baron, then at the climax of fortune and pride, was exhibiting his armoury to his uncle, Count Tegrimo of Porciano, and asked him what he thought of it. "The said Count Tegrimo responded promptly and unexpectedly with a witty and noteworthy jest, and said: 'It appears to me very good, only I understand that the Florentines lend at heavy interest.'" The prophecy contained in the old man's words was too well fulfilled later. In 1290, a year after the battle of Campaldino, the Florentines having spoilt all the country of the Aretines, entered the Casentino again and laid waste the lands of Guido Novello "and destroyed his fortress and palace of Poppi, which were very strong and wonderful." Count Guido di Battifolle, son of Simone, rebuilt the castle. In gratitude for his services to the Guelf party, Florence had granted him a sum for repairing the damage done to the Guidi possessions after Campaldino. The builder was Lapo, *father* of Arnolfo da Cambio, according to Vasari, who also says that Arnolfo designed the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence after the likeness of that in the Casentino. Vasari errs however in making Arnolfo Lapo's son, as he was apparently only the pupil of the elder architect, but there is certainly some such relationship between the

two works of their hands. The massive walls and battlements and soaring tower of the feudal stronghold, which unite the grim and heavy character proper to the mediæval Tuscan with a Gothic grace of ornamentation, make it seem a smaller version of the great palace of the Florentine people. A noticeable feature of Poppi Castle is the proportion of the eastern façade, which is narrower than the other three sides of the building, so that when seen from the valley road below, the flanks slope slightly outwards from it with peculiar effect.[1] The large green which lies before the castle, shaded with trees and reminding one of the peaceful surroundings of an old English baronial mansion, was once the great courtyard or piazza, and was enclosed within strong walls. It was the joust and tilting ground, the *campo franco* or field where duels might be fought, and the place of games and merrymaking. The splendid façade of the Castle on this side, in the midst of which rises the tower, is probably a later addition to Lapo's original building. The fine ornamentation of the gothic windows has a very renewed look, but in only one has the old wŏrk been replaced by a modern copy ; the others have been cleaned and repaired.

Passing through the low postern tower and across the now filled-in moat, you enter beneath a great arched portal guarded by the image of a lion sculptured in bas-

[1] This was probably for some purpose of defence. Can it be that the castle archers were thus able to shoot from a wider front than they would present to the missiles of a besieging foe ?

relief above it, a fifteenth century work, attributed to Jacopo Turriani. The dark and lofty castle hall, or cortile, of noble architectural form, is now in sad decay; the flag-stones are green and moist; the walls, plastered with the sculptured devices of the successive castellans and once richly frescoed above, are damp and crumbling. One's voice echoes and is lost in the hollow silence of deep vaulted spaces. A massive wall encloses the lowest flight of the staircase, which ascends at a steep pitch to the gallery at the top, supported by arches in the wall, and has the remains of an ornate and graceful balustrade. This staircase is of later date than the great hall, as may be seen by the traces of old windows which it masks. The Castle is undergoing a very slow process of restoration, in the course of which a lower gallery on the east side has been pulled down



CORTILE, POPPI CASTLE

under the probably mistaken impression that it did not belong to the original design of the building. Off the hall are prisons, still used, though the grimmer of the dungeons are left to the ghosts; one of them is confidently pointed out as the prison of Dante, who, if the vulgar are to be believed, must have passed a great deal of time in the Casentino in confinement. Some gratings in the floor cover the openings to gruesome underground dungeons and oubliettes, and a great stone table, upon which scourgings and various torments are said to have been inflicted upon offenders, adds to the grim impression of the place. Over this scene of baronial justice presides a colossal fresco, now almost indistinguishable, of the Madonna enthroned, with saints kneeling and standing around. On the left of the entrance there is a door leading into the old cistern or reservoir of the castle, a great vaulted underground chamber, still partly filled with water.



STATUE, POPPI CASTLE

At the top of the long staircase stands an interest-

ing statue of a warrior in armour, forming a caryatid, and popularly called Count Guidoguerra, who was, however, dead long before the castle was built. If one of the Guidi at all, it must be a much later Count. Passerini, the historian of the family, says it is Guido di Battifolle, who restored the castle. The staircase gives access to some fine rooms, showing remains of frescoes and decorations, much of which is sixteenth century work. The walls of the little chapel, however, are covered with fourteenth century paintings, by some follower of Taddeo Gaddi. They are usually attributed to Jacopo Landino, known as Jacopo del Casentino, a native of Prato-vecchio. Vasari has included this artist in his lives of the painters, relating that when Taddeo Gaddi was working at La Verna, the superior of the convent placed the boy Jacopo with him to learn the art of painting, in which he succeeded so well that he was commissioned later to do many works in Florence and elsewhere as well as in the Casentino. There is little of his work now known. The one or two pictures to which his name is attached in public galleries seem to belong to the fifteenth century. The subjects represented here at Poppi are the Story of St. John the Baptist, the Death of the Virgin, the Presentation in the Temple, and scenes from the legend of St. John the Evangelist. The kneeling figures in the scene of John Baptist preaching are portraits of some of the Guidi, and the two foremost are in all probability Count

Roberto di Battifolle, Petrarch's friend, and his brother Count Carlo. Their heads are, however, scarcely distinguished from the conventional type which the painter uses for all the figures alike in these frescoes. The corresponding female figures in the fresco of Salome are no doubt the ladies of the family. In a passage or room now open on to the gallery there is a curious painting of a Love standing upon a fountain, with two figures below that seem intended for Dante and Beatrice. On the opposite wall appears a figure of Fortune on a wheel.

The traces of the old lords have been everywhere overlaid by the later Florentine governors or vicars who ruled the Casentino after the expulsion of the Guidi, and made Poppi their palace. I sought long in vain for some device of the original House among the heraldic emblems which adorn the walls of the castle, inside and outside—the Marzocco of Florence, the Palle of the Medici, the hundred and one shields of cavaliers of noble Tuscan families, including several of glazed terra-cotta, surrounded by garlands of flowers and fruit, by the school of the Della Robbia. At last, at the top of the long flight of stairs, just at the turn, I discovered a worn stone ornament, sculptured with the original shield of the Conti, the Cross of St. Andrew, on a field still showing traces of blue colour. The later Guidi introduced a lion—or sometimes two lions—into their arms, which varied a good deal in the different branches of the family. The shield in its later

form is, I believe, upon the arch at the foot of the staircase.

It is the romantic associations with the Guidi and their days that one seeks in this Castle, and naturally the first question is, Was Dante ever here? There exist two letters, addressed from Poppi, by the Countess Gherardesca, wife of Guido di Battifolle, to Margaret of Brabant, Henry VII.'s Empress, which were found in a manuscript containing letters of Dante's, and have therefore been conjectured to have been composed by him, in which case he must have been an inmate of the castle at the time. Apart from this doubtful evidence there seems no very good reason for supposing that he found shelter with a noble who was closely allied with the Republic which had exiled him, and who served it faithfully against Dante's beloved Emperor.

A guest of a very different sort, the odious tyrant of Florence, Walter de Brienne, was certainly here, and the great chamber off the cortile, where the archives are kept, is supposed to be the scene of his ratification of the act of abdication. In spite of the horrors of blood from which he had barely escaped with his life out of the enraged city, the Duke at first refused to sign. Then said the Count: "My Lord Duke, if you will not observe that which you have sworn to the Florentines I will not for that reason use towards you any force or violence except that I will carry you back to Florence and there you can at your

ease settle the matter with the city, as seems most good to you." The hint was enough. The Duke delayed no longer, but taking up the pen, ratified his surrender of the office which he had so shamefully abused.

A later notability associated with the castle and with its last lord is Santi Cascesi, a boy of Poppi, whose story is one of the romances of history. About 1430 Ercole Bentivoglio, one of the great Bolognese House of that name, being in exile, spent some time at Poppi, where he fell in love with a beautiful carpenter's wife, who in course of time bore a son. The boy was brought up by his supposed father, Agnolo Cascesi, and after the early death of the latter and of his mother, by Agnolo's brother, Antonio. He was much favoured by the Count of Poppi, who, when he was driven out of the Casentino, took the child with him to Bologna. Here Santi was seen by Annibale Bentivoglio, then lord of the city, who, pleased with his looks and manners, caressed him, saying: "Thou art one of us. I would have you come quickly to your rightful home." But Antonio Cascesi, who was a man of substance and good standing, insisted on the boy being sent back to Poppi, and on his return apprenticed him to the Arte della Lana in Florence. Some years later Annibale Bentivoglio was murdered by his enemies, and the great party, of which he was the leader, was left without a head. Then the Count of Poppi, who had taken up his abode in Bologna, revealed that there was a son of Ercole Bentivoglio's in

existence. Whereupon the Bolognese sent messengers to Florence to seek out the youth, that they might set him in the place of his fathers at the head of the party. When Santi was told who he was he was so deeply troubled for the shame of his mother that he could hardly be persuaded to consider the great fortune opened to him. His uncle, who was equally ignorant of the secret of his birth, was also much distressed at the revelation. But the Bolognese ambassadors, who looked upon the youth with the deepest devotion, declaring that he so resembled Ercole that there could be no doubt about his parentage, were resolved to have him for their lord. They set before him all the honour and wealth and power that should be his, but the boy hesitated long, deterred by shame for his mother, and also by some fear, remembering the fate of all the last three successive heads of the Bentivogli, who had each died a violent death. Then the advice of Cosimo de' Medici was sought, and Santi was taken to visit him. The wise Florentine gave judgment on the question in characteristic spirit; he refused to persuade the young man to go or to stay, but bade him go home and consider well to which part his heart inclined him, for accordingly it would appear whose son he was. For if he were the real son of the man of high race nature would draw him to Bologna and to great purposes; but if he were the son of the carpenter he would stay in Florence and content himself with little things. And in the end the influence of his

great blood prevailed with the youth, and he agreed to go. Conducted by the chief nobles of Bologna, whom the city sent to accompany him, and followed by a splendid train, the young apprentice, now transformed into a prince, set forth to the scene of his great destiny, where he was met by all the people, who greeted him with the greatest enthusiasm. He was put in possession of all the palaces and lands of Annibale Bentivoglio, and given chief office in the state, which he governed so well that he quickly won the love and esteem of the whole city. No fairy tale was ever more strange or more satisfactorily rounded off with "and lived happily ever after" than this story of real life.

At the other end of the castle green stands an ancient tower belonging to another palace of the Guidi, of which nothing else remains except a fine subterranean cistern beneath the villa now occupying the spot. An underground passage once connected the two palaces and served as a hiding-place or means of escape in case of necessity. There still hangs about the old Devil's Tower, as it is called, a grim legend of sin and revenge, belonging to the old Guidi days. A certain Contessa Telda, granddaughter of the second Simone di Battifolle, lived in this palace. By her great beauty and fascination she allured to her all the most desirable young men that came that way, and each after passing a short time with her mysteriously disappeared. It was discovered that as soon as she tired of a lover she had him precipitated

through a trap-door into the dungeons below and there killed. One day a beautiful youth of Poppi thus disappeared; whereupon his kinsfolk, rousing all the people of the town, attacked the palace, and, taking her prisoner, shut her up in the tower and left her to perish of hunger.

But strenuous times, whether for good or evil, are over for Poppi. The only event of historic interest connected with the little town in comparatively modern times was the tragedy of Tommaso Crudeli, the last victim of the Inquisition in Tuscany. This brilliant man of letters, who belonged to a very old family of Poppi, was cruelly imprisoned by the Inquisition in Florence in 1739 on account of his liberal opinions and his witty and somewhat free tongue. His treatment formed the subject of great protests from the British Ambassador. But more than a year passed before he was released, and when he came out of his prison he was completely broken down in health. He returned to his native town, and died there a year or two later at the age of forty-five.

And now, in these days of civil peace and liberty, Poppi's walls and towers and secret vaulted places have lost their significance and grown melancholy. The little town clinging perilously to the steep slopes beneath the castle, on a foothold cut out in the rock and walled up to save it from slipping down, is a survival of the past. Its lofty isolation, once its chief virtue, is become a defect. To sit proud and aloof

upon a hill-top profits no one nowadays, and though the smooth, ribbon-like roads which score the plain beneath, running in all directions, unite Poppi with the outer world beyond the barrier of hills, she remains high and dry above the current of life, with little to do but dream of the old joy of battle and her vanished chieftains.

But over there on the eastern hill that other fortress of the past, still whole and unvanquished, looks down upon the dismantled citadel of the Guidi with the old reproach and admonition. The fabric raised upon the foundations laid by the apostle of poverty and humility has proved greater and more lasting than that based upon the shifting sands of earthly power and possession.

On a mountain spur overhanging Poppi on the south a huge fragment of masonry ridges the precipice, like the buttress of some "Dark Tower." This is all that remains of the Castle of Fronzola which in Villani's day was one of the strongest fortresses in Tuscany. There was a proverb which ran: "Quando Fronzola fronzolava, Poppi e Bibbiena tremava" (When Fronzola rustled, Poppi and Bibbiena trembled). The castle was seized from the Guidi in 1322 by Bishop Guido of Arezzo and held by his family, the Tarlati, for many years, and the two castles, but a mile and a half apart, snarled at each other like two angry dogs. The reward claimed by

Count Simone di Battifolle for helping the Florentimes to rid themselves of the Duke of Athens was their aid against the Tarlati, and with 500 men sent by the Republic he laid siege to the Rock in 1344, and at last drove out the foe. The castle was dismantled by Florence after the expulsion of the Guidi from Poppi in 1440.



ENTRANCE TO CONVENT OF LA VERNA

CHAPTER VII

THE ROCK OF SAN FRANCESCO

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace!"

Upon the crest of the hills in the south-east of the Valley rises the Rock of La Verna, with the Franciscan convent perched like a bird in a cleft of its long spiny back. Thither the eyes of the wanderer to-day turn as persistently as those of the contentious barons in the castles below long ago. The peculiar shape of the Sacred Mount and the dark garment of forest which

clothes it mark it out amid the dry and sterile summits around. To those in the Valley it is the gateway to the East, whence the Wise Men came. The sun rises from behind it, and lingers upon it last of all, when the ridges around are already grey. Every hour of the day brings it a changing glory, from that earliest moment before the dawn when you first descry it looming against the blanching sapphire of the sky. In the low beams of the newly-risen sun it glows translucent as with some inward flame amid wreaths of fiery mist, and you feel that the mystic Sacrifice is being offered up anew which once caused the mountain to shine with a light so bright that it woke the sleepers far below. And so it passes onward into the purple and golden alternations of full day, and in the afternoon withdraws itself within a celestial vesture of rose, till evening brings new fire and gold, and it burns with a deeper and deeper crimson against the crystalline flame of the sky.

The very equinoxes seem to respect this holy place. When the whole Apennine range has been black with impending storm I have seen La Verna shining still, the last to be overwhelmed in the cataclysm. And out of the veil of rain, the billowy ocean of vapour that has levelled the mountains with the valley, it has been the first to reappear, an Ararat upon the flood.

But the Mons Felix does not always vouchsafe itself to our gaze. Often when all around is clear, and every fold and wrinkle is marked out upon the secular hills, a little cloud, like a dove's wing, rests upon it



La Verna at Sunset.

and wraps it from us. Again, cut off from earth by encircling mists, it floats in the pure ether, or through the fine veil of a shower, smitten by sunlight, it will appear infinitely far off, no solider than a dream. Sometimes—not often—the Rock is grey and sad, just a thing of earth, a vision no longer.

The story of San Francesco's acquisition of La Verna is well known. We all remember from the *Fioretti* how, at the great feast at Montefeltro for the knighting of a member of that noble House, the wonderful words of the small barefooted brother with the flaming eyes, whose tales were of the valiant and sorely tried knights and virgins of Christ, held all the revellers in a spell, and how Count Orlando of Chiusi in Casentino was so moved that he sought out Francesco after the preaching and inquired of him privately concerning his own soul. "And in the end Messer Orlando said to the holy Francesco: I have in Tuscany a most devout mountain (*monte devotissimo*) which is called the Mountain of the Vernia, which is very solitary and wild, and passing fit for him who would do penance in a place removed from the world, or for him who desires a solitary life; if it please thee, I will willingly give it to thee and to thy companions, for the welfare of my soul."

San Francesco, hearing "so liberal an offer of that thing which he much desired, was greatly rejoiced." He agreed with Count Orlando to send two of his companions to visit the mountain, and if it appeared to

them all that was described, he would accept the loving offer.

The two brothers, to whom the Count gave a little company of soldiers to defend them from the wild beasts, presently returned full of joy to their master at Assisi and related to him how they had taken possession of a place upon the mountain, exceedingly well fitted for prayer and contemplation. Whereupon San Francesco was very joyful and gave praise and thanks to God, and before long he prepared to go up thither himself.

He took with him three of the brothers who loved and understood him best. There is a charming holiday feeling about the story of this journey. Burdens and cares had already begun to weigh upon the fast-growing community, and material considerations and all the complex influences of earthly existence were spoiling its founder's poetic dream of the perfect evangelic life. But alone with his three friends he would follow the counsel of his own heart and conform to the letter with those precepts of the Gospel which he knew to be the way of liberty and happiness. *For the holy followers of Poverty, having nothing, have no fear of losing aught; everywhere safe, they are stopped by no terrors, are distracted by no fears, and without any anxiety await from one day the next.*[1]

So they would take no thought for the morrow, what they should eat, or where they should sleep.

[1] Thomas of Celano.

Bread they could beg and God would provide them a lodging. Scripless and purseless, they set forth, making the sign of the Cross.

On the second day bad weather overtook them, and they were very weary; no village or house was at hand. But they found an abandoned church in which they sheltered themselves. Here Francesco, praying after his custom while his companions slept, was assailed by devils, and after a whole night of wrestling he emerged victorious and joyful, but so worn out in body that he could continue his way no longer on foot. Help was forthcoming. A poor countryman willingly lent his pack-ass when he heard that he who needed it was *that Brother Francesco d'Assisi, of whom so much good is related*, and mounting the saint upon the beast, he himself followed on foot. When they were gone a little way he said:

"Tell me, art thou Brother Francesco d'Assisi?" and when he heard that it was so: "Then endeavour, therefore," said the peasant, "to be as good as thou art held to be by all men, inasmuch as the people have great faith in thee; and therefore I admonish thee that thou be not other than that which they hope of thee."

Francesco straightway flung himself from his steed to the ground, and kneeling before the man, kissed his feet and thanked him humbly because he had deigned to admonish him with so much charity. They proceeded onwards up the mountain side,

through the oak forest, over rocks and stones and across ravines, and the heat became very great, so that the peasant began to cry out:

"Alack, I die of thirst."

Then San Francesco prayed very earnestly to God and told the man to go to a certain spot close by, where he would find a fountain of fresh water. And he did so and found the fountain as San Francesco had said, and drank of it and was refreshed. But the story says that this fountain was never seen there before, and has never been found since.

Presently they came to the foot of the Rock and sat down to repose themselves. In this wilderness, to reach which they had nearly died of heat and fatigue, a beautiful spreading oak now gave them comfortable shade, and in this old haunt of robbers and wild beasts nothing came to molest the *Poverello di Dio*. Only a loud singing and a fluttering of wings was suddenly heard, and a great multitude of birds surrounded him and alighted, some upon his head, others on his shoulders, on his arms, in his lap, at his feet. Then he said, all joyous of heart:

"I believe, oh, dearest brethren, that it is pleasing to our Lord Jesus Christ that we should dwell in this solitary mountain, since our brothers and sisters, the birds, show such gladness at our coming."

The two pioneer brothers had made huts for themselves in the place where the convent now stands, and Count Orlando, who hastened up with his people when

he heard that Francesco was come, quickly caused a rough cell to be built at the foot of a beautiful beech tree, a spot chosen by the saint as especially "devout" and suited for praying.

Before he took his leave the Count besought his "dearest brethren" to send to his house for everything that they needed, as it was not his intent that in this wild place they should suffer for any bodily necessity, which might make them less mindful of spiritual things. But Francesco knew well that ease of body was no encouragement to contemplation and prayer. In this high place he was resolved that his Lady Poverty should be supreme, and that, where the atmosphere was become so pure and clean that it seemed already more like heaven than earth, no thought of the flesh should weigh down the winged soul.

When the Count was gone he made his companions sit down and taught them the way of the religious life in a hermitage. And more especially he enjoined upon them the observance of Holy Poverty, saying:

"Do not regard the loving proffer of Messer Orlando so much as in aught to offend our lady, Madonna la Povertà." And again: "Let us persevere in holy poverty, since it is a way of perfection and an earnest of eternal riches."

Thus did San Francesco take possession of his castle. Thus was this mountain, the habitation of rude Nature and her ancient votaries, whose kings are said in dim past days to have made their seat there among

the thunderbolts, consecrated to a new cult, the mystic paradox that reveals sweetness in the lion's carcase, strength in weakness, love in pain. The Cross, lifted by the three handmaids—Poverty, Humility and Chastity—was henceforth to be the beacon for the Apennine valleys.

It was in 1213 that Count Orlando de' Cattani gave La Verna to Francesco d'Assisi, a gift confirmed by his sons in a legal instrument in 1274. After that first visit, the saint often came there again. There is no precise record in the early biographies of these different visits. The *Fioretti* confound his first and last ascents in one, but we may gather from that enchanting record and from the other early legends something of his life upon the Rock.

Often, when his virtue was all gone out of him because of his fervour in healing souls, or his spirit was cast down by some compromise with his ideal forced upon him by the world, or some new frustration of his dear desire of martyrdom, he would seek La Verna, where in the silence and free space, lifted above the sordid world and remote from the curious multitude, he could refresh his soul, which needed only God. Guarded from intrusion by the faithful companions whom he always took with him, he would pass long hours in secret communion with the Unseen. Here he could live unhindered according to the rule of his heart, and with fasting and with hot tears make his body conform to that passion of the soul which

he suffered continually because of the Cross of Christ.

Nesting in the holes of the rocks and making his habitation in caves, often giving his frail limbs only a cold and rigid stone for a couch, he sought to share the Agony which filled him with such a rapture of pity and love. He descended into the secret and terrible places of the mountain which all men believed to be the habitation of evil spirits, and wrestled with the devils therein till he compelled them to reveal themselves as in reality the servants and agents of Christ. Then when fear was cast out, comforted and renewed in spirit he heard the cloven rocks suddenly resound with a song of praise and knew that the whole earth was redeemed. All the creatures of God in fraternal concord with him and with one another praised the Lord; and where before in the frozen walls of the mountain the dumbness of eternal ages had reigned, he saw the tender green fronds springing in the crevices, and heard, joining in the joyful chorus, the consoling voice of *our sister, the Bodily Death.*

And here at La Verna was to be fulfilled in a new and strange manner that consummation of love, that union with Christ, that sacramental martyrdom, for which his whole being yearned. This mount, for him whose life had been a joyful Calvary, was to be the scene of actual sacrifice. Two years before his death, Francesco, who was now weak from many bodily infirmities, and whose heart was so full with constant

meditation on the sorrow of Christ that he continually melted into tears, turned his feeble steps once more to the place which was perhaps already peculiarly associated in his mind with the thought of the Crucifixion. The Quaresima, or forty days' fast in preparation for the Feast of St. Michael, was at hand, and Francesco, who held the archangel in especial reverence, had elected to keep it at La Verna.

He took with him his three constant companions, Brother Masseo, Brother Angelo, and Brother Leo. Mounted upon an ass, for he was utterly unable to ascend on foot, he entered the place where he was to suffer the great experience of his life. After his usual manner here, he withdrew himself from his companions and passed his time in a fervour of prayer and meditation. Feeling that his death was now not far off, he wept often for the future of his Order, when he should no longer be there to care for it.

"Lord God," he would say, "how will it be with thy poor family, which Thou hast committed to me, sinner that I am? Who will comfort them, correct them, pray for them?"

Crying thus, he was visited, we are told, by the angel of the Lord and filled with new hope, and consoled in heart he gave himself after this wholly to the contemplation of the Crucified.

Sometimes stealing upon him unawares, the brothers would see and hear him weeping aloud the passion of Christ, as if he saw it with his bodily eyes. But their

wonder and veneration disturbed the saint. He would have none but Brother Leo near him, *who was of a passing simplicity and purity, so that San Francesco loved him very dearly* and called him, instead of Brother Lion, Fra Pecorella di Dio, the little lamb of God.

One day Brother Leo was troubled by a very great temptation of the devil, and there came to him a great desire to have something devout written by the hand of San Francesco, believing that if he could have it the temptation would depart. But he dared not ask. San Francesco, however, perceived what was the matter, and calling him, bade him bring pen and ink, and with his own hand he wrote a benediction of Brother Leo and gave it to him. These were the words: *May the Lord bless thee and keep thee, show thee His face and have compassion upon thee, turn His countenance upon thee and give thee peace.* And underneath he drew a Tau cross, upon a skull, for his sign.[1]

Brother Leo, immediately released from temptation and consoled in spirit, was filled with joy and wonder at his master's knowledge of his heart, and from thenceforth regarded him as an angel.

Often when Francesco was rapt in ecstasy the disciple would think he saw him lifted up bodily in the air, and creeping to his feet, would kiss them and weep over

[1] This document, inscribed by Brother Leo with the words, *the blessed Francis wrote with his hand this benediction for me, Brother Leo*, and with an account of the miracle of the Stigmata, is preserved at the Sacro Convento at Assisi.

them, praying that thus he too, through the merits of this man, might be carried up into heaven.

But even this reverent companionship was irksome to Francesco. His soul needed to be alone in its upward flight. He summoned Brother Leo one day and bade him go and stand beside the oratory of the friars, and come to him when he heard him call. Presently Leo heard a call and went and found his master. "My son," said Francesco, "let us seek another place where you shall not be able to hear me." Before long he spied a solitary spot cut off from them by a horrible cleft in the rock and not to be reached save by means of a great tree trunk, which with difficulty was laid across for a bridge. There he elected to have a little rough cell built where it was not possible that for any cry he could be heard by the Brothers. When it was made he sent his companions all away and bade that none should come to him. Brother Leo alone was to come once a day with a little bread and water, and again in the night at the hour of Matins, when he should come silently, and standing at the head of the bridge should say: *Domine, labra me aperies.* And if the master responded he was to cross and enter the cell and they would say Matins together. But if there was no answer he was to depart instantly. And the Brothers did as Francesco bade them and left him alone.

Now began that forty days' retreat, of which we may not probe the mysteries. Only we know that now

was come the hour of fiercest trial, of bitterness like unto death, for this follower of Christ, issuing in a strange and new consolation. Here was his Gethsemane, his Golgotha, his split rock-tomb.

To Brother Leo only was vouchsafed some glimpse of that secret strife, and he depicted it afterwards in those bodily images which were the simple expression of his spiritual insight, telling of fasting and mortification, of night-long watchings, of weeping and prayer; of conflict with invisible demons, of angelic visits and consolation, of music from celestial viols breathing around the recluse such intolerable sweetness that all bodily feeling left him for the time.

Once, when his master did not answer to the gentle matin call, the faithful disciple, instead of going away, sought him out where he was praying in the moonlit woods and was witness to ineffable things, which he could only explain afterwards as wondrous apparitions and miraculous voices talking with the holy man. But Francesco, alarmed by the rustle of his feet upon the dead leaves, turned and saw him, and Leo was overcome by fear and penitence. Moved by his simplicity and devotion, the Saint only upbraided him gently. And when they had read together in the Scriptures, opening the Book at hazard three separate times as their innocent custom was and always alighting on the story of the Passion, he sent the disciple away and bade him watch him no more.

With Brother Leo we too stand afar off and by the

outward manifestations strive to learn something of the motions of the spirit. The flesh indeed played a significant part in that drama of a soul, witnessing to it in a new and marvellous manner. When Francesco's companions saw him deny and discipline his body for its sinfulness, as they supposed, was it not rather suffering a glorious fellowship with the strong spirit within? Francesco was no abhorrer of the body. In that pessimistic age, penetrated with the Manichean idea of the inherent evil of the flesh, when men thought to obtain grace by senselessly torturing themselves, he vindicated the honour of that human vesture which the Son of God had put on, and which the Christian expected to resume at the Resurrection and wear in eternal life. The strange pleasure in blood, which mingled with the mediæval Italian's mystic worship of the Cross, prompting now a mad ecstasy of devotion, now an inhuman self-immolation, was absent from his strong clean soul. He who saw that Nature was beautiful and good, who loved all God's creatures with a fraternal love, called his body also his brother.

And did he not himself bear witness at the end of his life that this body, which from privation and rigour was already well-nigh dead, had in all things been obedient, had never stinted in giving itself, had shunned no labour, refused no discomfort? *In this it and I agreed perfectly, that without any reluctance we served the Lord Christ.*[1] "Gaude, frater corpus!" he cries. And we

[1] Thomas of Celano.

see the willing limbs, grown so light that earthly gravitation scarcely holds them, joyously consenting to the exaltation of the spirit, mounting upwards to that consecration which was to give them new sanctification. In the rapture of privation, released almost from mortal burdens, the fleshly vessel wears ever more exquisitely fine till it becomes a transparent crystal lamp for the flame within.

Was it not in the body that Christ died for us? Francesco's deep intimate searchings into the all-suffering heart of the Man of Sorrows uttered itself continually in an anguish of love and pity for the wounded Body. To suffer with it, to share its martyrdom became an irresistible need. The intolerable ecstasy of the soul had to find outward expression, brand itself upon the flesh.

There came a moment when pain and joy transcended their bounds and united in one unutterable emotion. Body and soul consummated a new union; heaven and earth mingled and met. Very early one morning Francesco knelt upon the mountain-top, his long night of vigil over. The day broke in the sapphire east and he saw before him a seraph stretched upon a cross and felt upon his flesh a mysterious touch. When the vision was gone, he found himself signed with the Five Wounds of Christ.

It was the 14th of September, the Feast of the Holy Cross. Strange things are said to have happened that morning. The mountain shone with a bright light, so

that the shepherds watching their flocks upon the hills were greatly afeard, and certain muleteers who were resting in a hostelry not far off rose and set their packs upon their beasts, thinking that the real sun was risen. But Francesco told no one what was done unto him. Concealing his hands and his feet as much as he could with his cloak, he came forth presently from his retreat and prepared to descend from the mountain. He took only Brother Leo with him, and commended the Sacred Mount very especially to the care and reverence of Fra Masseo, Frate Angelo and the other brothers left behind. He bade a long, touching farewell to them and to the place which he loved so well, weeping as he went on his way and repeating again and again :

"A Dio tutti, a Dio Monte, a Dio, a Dio Monte Alverna, a Dio carissimo, a Dio carissimo."

Throughout the seven centuries that have passed since the mystic vision came to Francesco d'Assisi upon the mount, La Verna has been regarded as a peculiarly holy place. Where that one man knelt and prayed alone, the prayers of hundreds have gone up unceasingly since. Hundreds of hundreds have hastened up that steep path first trodden by him, that they might live like him in obedience to the three vows. Wherever his foot stepped, there has sprung up a chapel, an oratory, or a shrine ; it is as if every sigh of his heart had embodied itself in enduring stone. So potent was

the effect of his preaching and so great the fame of the mysterious sanctification which he had suffered on the Mount that the rich and powerful very soon began to build chapels and monastic dwellings there in memory of the miracle of the Stigmata. The barons of the Casentino, especially the Conti Guidi di Battifolle, were some of the most zealous of these patrons. Before long a splendid convent had taken the place of the anchorite's cell, a change far indeed from the intention of the saint. It was inevitable perhaps that his ideal of the perfect apostolic life should suffer modification. But Lady Poverty, whom he so anxiously desired that his disciples should in no way offend, has not been dethroned. This Franciscan palace in the snows and clouds is nearer to the sky than other earthly habitations, and life there is austere enough. By continual prayer, by fasting and nightly vigil, by discipline of body and soul, the followers of Poverty seek those spiritual joys for which they have abandoned the world. Unsparing of themselves they carry on the work of their master, and up and down the long steep way and over the solitary mountain tracks, through storm and snow or summer heat, the hardy, brown-frocked figures may be seen, two by two, striding barefoot about their business of preaching the Gospel to the dwellers in the valleys and cities below. Kindliness, gentleness and simplicity, those virtues which belonged so peculiarly to Francesco and his first disciples, still flourish in the

fresh pure air at La Verna, breathing the *sweet Franciscan poesy* over the savage rocks and forests. And nowhere does the traveller find a more courteous and hospitable welcome. The brothers give refreshment, and lodging if needed, to everyone who comes; they show the pilgrim all their sanctuaries and shrines, their many treasures of art, and the natural wonders of the Rock, and admit him readily to their most sacred ceremonies.

Bibbiena is the nearest town to La Verna, which is distant from it two hours or more by carriage. The road descends and ascends by turns sharply for two or three miles over the low intervening hills, between hedges thick in May with heavy-scented honeysuckle, till you come to a deep valley at the foot of the mountain upon which the Rock rises. Here a lovely stream, the Corsalone, darts like a silver streak on its solitary course between the hills, to empty itself before long into the Arno. Crossing its wide, shallow bed by a wooden bridge, you begin the ascent through the oak woods which clothe the mountain side, delicious flowery solitudes, in which some sylvan spirit seems to lurk, delicate, joyous, kindly. For since San Francesco came up, the wilderness has lost its terrors, and is found to be inhabited by gentleness and peace. In holes blasted by old thunderbolts one perceives lichens and young green things growing. If the sunshine, which spreads its living gold between the deep shadows of the trees, burn too fiercely, a fountain will surely spring up

beside the path. The air grows purer and lighter, the heart more free and glad, as one presses up beneath the glowing blue. After a long climb the wood emerges in a wide moorland, covered with sweet thin herbage and scattered with rocks; a world so pale and fresh and pure that it seems hardly of this earth. Scanty flocks of lean sheep crop between the boulders. The children who herd them are fair, and there is infinite pathos in their large, simple gaze; over just such *pecorelle*, the prey then of many ravening wolves, the heart of Francesco long ago yearned with love and pity.

And there, close before you, rises the Sacred Mount, a strange outcrop of pallid grey rock, rearing itself upon the hill-top in gigantic precipices, cleft with deep ravines and heavily curtained with woods. Seen across the sterile wilderness at its foot, after the long day's journey through the forest, it may well have been to him who first approached like the Dark Tower to which Childe Roland came. Now upon the solitary road below a tall cross stands, for a sign that from the enchanted precinct guarded by the symbol of love the devils have fled away. The space beyond, at the foot of the Rock, seems indeed like the borderland of some earthly paradise. Here spread fresh green lawns and the pleasant shade of trees. Cold winds do not visit this sheltered spot, and even in the winter months the sun's rays are so enhanced by reflection from the towering limestone wall that summer seems still to be

there. In the spring the grass is enamelled with a million vari-coloured flowerets, and upon the rocks the white rock cress hangs thick, and the leopard's bane is a glory of gold, while in the fields close by the sweet narcissus springs freely.

The convent stands on the verge of the precipice, its campanile and buildings enwalled by the huge grey buttresses of the Rock like a fortress of giants. The steep ascent is scaled by a broad path now, very different to the rough track up which the weary feet of the Poverello climbed seven hundred years ago. The great tree which gave him shade is no longer here; it was withered long ago by the depredations of pilgrims upon its bark. Nor do the birds come now to welcome the wayfarer; only a lonely twitter in the silence of the woods around reminds one that a few of them still survive in these days of guns. But at the turn of the path there is a little chapel, called of the Birds and built in 1602 by means of alms collected by a devout brother, which commemorates that sweet moment of intimacy between man and Nature.

A great arched portal, planted upon the rocks, admits into the precincts above. How holy this place is into which you are about to pass you are reminded by the inscription upon the arch: *Non est in toto sanctior orbe mons.* And in the solemn shadow beneath it sit, quite unafraid and unabashed, a group of poor folk, who know that they are welcome wherever the Brothers Minor dwell, in the name of him



THE ROCK OF SAN FRANCESCO.

whose heart went out with so much tenderness to the poor and needy that if he had nothing else to give he would cut off a piece of his only garment for them.

Within the great entrance, where was once the boulder-strewn ground, spread with mosses and pillared and roofed only by the soaring beeches, there is now a fine piazza, surrounded by churches and cloisters and conventual buildings. Facing the gateway is the low picturesque portico of the oldest sanctuary upon the Mount, Sta. Maria degli Angeli, commonly called the Chiesina, and to the right is the ancient archway and dark vaulted passage leading into the interior of the convent. The Chiesina is said to have been founded by San Francesco himself, according to directions and measurements given to him in a vision on the spot by the Mother of God herself. To her he dedicated the sanctuary when by the help of Count Orlando it had been built, giving it, like the church he had founded at Assisi, the title of Sta. Maria degli Angeli. When pilgrims began to throng to the Mount after San Francesco's death it was found necessary to enlarge and rebuild the church, but the upper part, which is of earlier date than the lower and is divided from it by a screen or low wall, shows traces of ancient gothic windows and doors, and is said to preserve the miraculous dimensions of the original church. The building was restored in the fifteenth century by one Domenico Bartoli, and later alterations have deprived it of architectural interest. There are some ancient

shields sculptured upon the façade, two of which bear the arms of the Catani of Chiusi, Count Orlando's family, a cross and three lilies.

Over the high altar of this church we see the first of the beautiful altar-pieces in which Andrea della Robbia has offered up, upon the Rock of La Verna, the best of his hand and soul to the glory of San Francesco. The exquisitely refined and graceful work of this artist, who expresses with so much charm and tender sentiment the meek and childlike spirit, and the sweet celestial visions of mediæval faith, is peculiarly associated with the stigmatised saint. There was in Andrea's day a marked revival of the cult of the Stigmata, prompted by the half-mystical, half-curious spirit of the late fifteenth century. St. Francis and St. Catherine of Siena were the objects of special devotion, and the strange phenomena which had appeared in both of them seem to have been repeated in quite a number of devout persons at this time. Andrea, who reflects with *naïveté* the ideas and thoughts current in his time, represents the person and legend of St. Francis again and again in his altar-pieces. But his mild and somewhat effeminate conception of the ardent-souled Francesco Bernardone is not very satisfying, for the artist, with all his gifts, had no profound understanding of human character.

Vasari tells us how Andrea produced many altar-pieces *on the Rock of La Verna which are imperishable in that solitary spot, where no painting, even for a few years,*

could endure. This does not necessarily mean, however, that he actually worked up here and was inspired by the very air and lofty surroundings in which the vision came to San Francesco, and the tradition that he had his furnaces close by must be regarded only as a romantic legend.[1] His works at La Verna are some of the most beautiful which he ever produced. Not one shows better the peculiar charm of his art than this altar-piece in the Chiesina, the Madonna giving her girdle to St. Thomas. Behind the doubting apostle kneels St. Clement, and San Francesco and San Bonaventura are on the other side. Here are the most delicate, the most ethereally lovely of floating angels, the sweetest-faced cherubs, the most sincere and spiritual of saints, all drawn by the force of their adoration into a halo round the most gracious of Madonnas. The beauty of the angels in the predella is specially notable. In detail the work is almost perfect, but, like many of this master's compositions, it is very overcrowded, and at a little distance the subject loses its significance. The arms of the Bartoli, who gave the altar-piece, are upon the predella. There are two other Della Robbia pieces in the church, gaudy and inferior productions of the later school—a Nativity and an Entombment.

The Chiesa Maggiore was not built till much later than the Chiesina, and one naturally seeks out first the sanctuaries more especially associated with San

[1] *See* Cruttwell, *Luca and Andrea della Robbia*, p. 172.

Francesco. But before passing to the *Luoghi Santi*, as these are called, one is arrested by the glorious prospect of sky and mountain and valley upon which the piazza is open on the south. This at least is the same now as when Francesco first stood on this place and breathed down upon the hundred castles tossed upon the spurs and ridges far below, his salutation: *Peace be with you.* All their master's spirit was in the two disciples who chose this particular spot for the new home of Obedience, Chastity and Poverty. For here, lifted so high above the cares and necessities of the world, earthly possessions are seen to be merely a drag and burden upon the soaring spirit, which can have need of nothing save wings. And only to breathe here is to be pure, and to obey is to sing with the stars in their spheres.

Now in the wake of the *Santuarista*—the Brother who holds the office of guide to the Luoghi Santi—you come to the part of the Rock specially consecrated by memories of the Seraphic Father. Here, on the edge of the precipice, the ground is rent with terrific chasms and deep caverns formed by titanic rocks heaped one upon another as if by some tremendous convulsion of the earth. These are the stony places in which San Francesco made his nest, and some of the most holy of the sanctuaries cling about their brink. Here is the place where the great beech tree once grew, beneath which Count Orlando had a little cell made for the saint on his first visit. Tree and hut of branches and

turf are long vanished, and in their stead have risen two little chapels, one above the other. These were built by Contessa Caterina, wife of Count Roberto dei Tarlati, towards the end of the fifteenth century. Cardinal Galeotto of the same family, who was distinguished by a specially vindictive, arrogant and quarrelsome temper, and by an ardent devotion to the Poverello of Assisi, was buried in the upper chapel in a fine tomb, which has now disappeared. Upon the altar of the lower chapel, which is dedicated to the Magdalen, lies a flat stone called the Mensa di San Francesco, which has always been regarded with great veneration as the very stone upon which, according to an ancient legend, Christ seated Himself when He appeared one day to the saint and promised him special blessings for his order. In the pages of the *Fioretti*, San Francesco himself relates this vision to Brother Leo, bidding him wash the stone with water, with wine, with oil, and with balsam. There is an inscription in Gothic characters, almost obliterated, upon the stone, referring to the vision.

From these chapels you are led down by steps cut in the rock, and stand upon the edge of the precipice which falls sheer to the green meadows at the foot of the Mount. Then descending again by a long narrow stair into a deep and cavernous place walled by immense masses of rock, and slipping over the slimy stones and oozy crevices, you stand beneath the Sasso Spicco, that far-famed natural marvel, a gigantic table

of stone poised in the air apparently without support, so slight is its attachment to the wall of rock from which it projects. In the chill, dark shadow under this threatening mass, which looks ready to fall and crush any who dares to step beneath, a tall cross rears itself. San Francesco has carried the sanctification of humanity and of faith into this savage haunt of terror and danger. When one remembers how the mediæval imagination peopled darkness and the unknown with the forms of evil and the shadow of death one appreciates the newness and courage of his spirit in penetrating into these awe-inspiring places. To a world possessed by the fear of the devil, he was come to declare the praise of God; to reassure men of His undivided dominion, and that the shows of evil and sorrow were but misunderstood aspects of His love. The awful mysteries of Nature were answered by the consoling mysteries of faith, and to his ardent imagination, ever occupied with the remembrance of the Passion, these tormented rocks were a visible witness of that moment of the great sacrifice on Calvary, when the earth shook and the veil of the Temple was rent in twain.

There is something also in Francesco's interest in these natural wonders which foreshadows the curiosity of the modern spirit towards the phenomena of Nature. One pictures the small frail figure slipping and springing from stone to stone, wounding hands and feet, smiling with the joyousness of a child. So strongly

does that vivid personality of seven hundred years ago still possess this place to-day, that lingering for a moment alone one feels it present, warm and quick, dispelling the deadly chill, vivifying the dead and deathless petrifaction around, calling one's eyes to the strip of glowing sky above, to the golden branches that dip from the brink of the chasm, and the reflected warmth that fills the green twilight of the cavern.

Having returned to the upper air, you are shown various tabernacles and shrines, each of which commemorates some miracle or sign of grace which has occurred on the spot. A long covered way leads from the Chiesa Maggiore to the most holy of all the sanctuaries upon the mount, the Chapel of the Stigmata. This passage was built in the latter part of the sixteenth century for the protection of the Brothers on their daily and nightly pilgrimage to the holy shrine, and is now decorated with incredibly bad modern frescoes, painted over a faded series of the sixteenth century. Half way down, a door on the left leads out into the open again and communicates by another steep stair with a dark and awesome grotto overhung by strangely suspended rocks. Here is the *Bed of San Francesco*, a flat rock moist with the eternal distillations of the mountain. Upon this the saint is said to have couched his emaciated frame when utterly worn out by spiritual wrestlings. The faithful regard this place with special devotion and weep compassionate tears upon the rigid stone, which has now been covered

with an iron grating that it might not be quite worn away in time by their fervent kisses. Marvellous things are related of sufferers healed by stretching themselves upon this painful couch.

Re-entering the corridor, you are conducted into several little chapels, of no great interest, on the way to the Sanctuary of the Stigmata. From one of these, dedicated to San Sebastiano, you issue forth again into the open, this time to stand over the precipice, which drops down beneath to a depth of over a hundred and twenty feet. Legend relates that to this spot, then unprotected from the abyss, San Francesco was wont often to come, and gazing out over the glorious landscape, give praise to God ; and that one day, as he sat rapt in contemplation, the devil suddenly appeared in most horrible aspect, and seizing hold of him, would have hurled him over the brink. But the saint, crying out to God, turned and clung with both hands to the rock, which, yielding as if it had been wax, gave him shelter, so that the arch enemy flew off, completely confounded. The marks of the holy man's fingers are said to have remained long visible upon the rock.

You are now close to the holy of holies, the Church of the Stigmata. To reach it you pass through the Chapel of the Cross, which stands on the supposed spot of the cell in which San Francesco passed his long retreat. Here it was that he remained hidden from his companions ; here Brother Leo sought him every day and every night. Here the falcon, nesting in the

precipitous crags outside, sang and beat his wings against the cell every morning to wake him, keeping silence like a compassionate and discreet person, the *Fioretti* tell us, till a later hour than usual on those days when Francesco was very weak and ill. But we must seek these fresh and tender memories in the open woods outside. It is in vain that we endeavour to connect them with the cold and dark interior of this oratory, which is quite devoid of beauty or artistic interest. It was built originally in the gothic style, and is believed to have been frescoed by Taddeo Gaddi in the fourteenth century, and tradition says that it had an altar-piece painted by Giotto representing San Francesco's adventure with the devil on the precipice. But later on the cult of the Stigmata was neglected for a time and the chapel fell into decay, to be restored and deformed in the seventeenth century. Some relics of the saint are preserved upon the altar.

Both this chapel and the Sanctuary of the Stigmata were built by a very notable and zealous votary of the apostle of humility, no other than that proud and wrathful member of the great House of Guidi, Count Simone di Battifolle, who took upon himself the endowment and maintenance of these holy places and of the special rites of the Stigmata. He charged his descendants to carry on the pious duty, which they appear to have done in a somewhat fitful manner His great-grandson, Count Roberto, the friend of Petrarch, intended to be buried in a splendid tomb

in the passage between the two sanctuaries, and left directions to that effect in his will, but they were apparently not carried out.

Upon the façade of the church there is a contemporary inscription carved in marble, recording that in 1263, five days "after the feast of the Assumption of the glorious Virgin Mary, Count Simone, son of the illustrious Guido, by the Grace of God, Count Palatine of Tuscany, founded this oratory in honour of the Blessed Francis, to whom in this same place the seraph appeared in the year of our Lord 1225, within the octave of the birth of the Virgin, and impressed upon his body and signed him with the Stigmata of Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit."

The building was originally gothic, like the chapel. Vasari records that Taddeo Gaddi covered walls and ceiling with frescoes. These have all perished, and little is left of the original design of the church. But the interior is simple and dignified, and is furnished with choir stalls of fine sixteenth century intarsia work, well restored quite lately by Fra Leonardo, the sacristan. One has eyes for nothing else in it however but the great Crucifixion upon the east wall, filling the whole space behind the altar. It is impossible to judge of this, the most impressive of all Andrea della Robbia's works, on its artistic merits, seeing it for the first time here. So wonderfully does it sum up the meaning and mystery of the place that one is overcome with awe, aware only of the love and

tragedy of the great Sacrifice, of the passion of Mother and Friend, of the anguish of the penitent sinners, expressed before one in that gleaming purity of white and blue above the dimness of the sanctuary.

Beneath, in the midst of the floor, guarded by an outer grating of iron and a marble slab, whereon is carved in cinquecento style a representation of the event commemorated here, is the portion of rock which has been regarded for ages with peculiar awe as the very spot whereon San Francesco knelt when he received the Stigmata. It is a vain and foolish curiosity that would search out the material circumstances of a great spiritual experience and would fix the precise moment and place of its happening. But the rites which man institutes in memory of that which is beyond comprehending must have a local habitation and a name. And the tears of penitence and love which have fallen upon this spot through all the long centuries, the souls for whom it has been a stepping-stone from earth to heaven, have changed it by the alchemy of faith from a material into a spiritual thing. It has been the centre of a constant worship ever since Count Simone built the church. The pious baron instituted and endowed a little band of hermits—five, like the number of the wounds of Christ—for the special service of the Stigmata and built for them five little cells in the place which is now the sacristan's garden. In this retreat, only to be reached by a narrow path along the edge of the crag, these devotees

led a life of extreme austerity, in strict seclusion from the rest of the community, and daily and nightly officiated in the church. The holiest members of the order were chosen for this high and difficult office. Men famous for sanctity, Giovanni della Verna, Corrado da Offida and others of the Strict Observants, were among them. But with time laxity of discipline crept in; few were found willing to dedicate themselves to this life of self-denial, and grave disorders were apparent among those who did. The Counts of Battifolle failed, on their side, to keep up the endowments for the bodily wants of the hermits, though each one on his death-bed earnestly recommended the pious duty to his successor. At length, in the fifteenth century, the hermitage was abolished, and nothing now remains of the cells. The offices in the church were committed to the whole community, and from that time forth, every day and every night at the same hour, a long procession of brothers has issued from the Chiesa Maggiore and passed down the long way to the



PROCESSION OF MONKS

Sanctuary of the Stigmata, there to perform the appointed rite.

Though once there was no sheltering corridor, they might not forego their journey for any tempest that midnight had loosed upon the Rock, or for any snow or bitterness of frost. If they did, the very beasts rebuked them. There is a legend that one night, the snow being very deep, the Brothers neglected this duty and in the morning they discovered to their confusion and shame, from the marks upon the snow, that the animals of the forest had gone in procession to the church instead of them.

This solemn service of the Stigmata is a deeply impressive ceremony. When the hour draws near, you hear the sound of distant chanting as the procession leaves the Chiesa Maggiore. It approaches rapidly, and round the curve of the corridor comes a tall young novice lifting a great cross on high, followed by two long files of brown-frocked Brothers whose bare feet beat to the measure of the monotonous litany. They pass and enter the darkened sanctuary, and the little gate is shut behind them. Prostrating themselves, they touch the ground with their foreheads. When they have sung an antiphon, two of the most youthful of the novices kneel in the midst and indicate with outstretched arm and finger the spot of the Seraphic Father's mysterious martyrdom. Then, when the office has been recited in full, all remain for a long space motionless upon their knees, with faces and hands up-

lifted in silent adoration. Above them shines the sun-illumined altar-piece, where the figure of the Man of Sorrows hangs on high upon the Cross, in the midst of the tears of saints and angels. In that shadowed crowd beneath, whose great ensample is written so clearly before them and whose accomplishment is hid in the obscurity of each individual heart, we may surely hear pulsing still, transmitted uninterrupted through all the centuries, the thrill of that mighty heart uplifted here into the arcana of mystic ecstasy, may feel warm and strong and living still that pure love and faith and adoration which wounding glorified him. Here, more than elsewhere, their master is in their midst.

They rise and pass out and away down the long corridor as they came, and the sound of their chanting grows fainter and fainter; the sacristan locks the gate and the sanctuary is empty once more. But in the silence of the night those long dark files will come again, stealing down the dimly-lighted way, like the shades of their daylight selves, risen to drive away the malignant spirits and to consecrate to Christ even this the unholy midnight hour. Their weird chanting precedes them, scattering with the long cry of *Ora pro nobis* those stranger voices that whispered in the darkness before.

But the power of the Enemy is great at this, the moment of the spirit's weakness. So out of the obscurity where the cloaked forms kneel comes the sound of the



In the Chapel of the Stigmata

self-inflicted *disciplina*, the clash of the chains with which they rend the flesh and strengthen the soul.

Ere the day breaks all have melted away into the shadows of the convent and the silence is once more unbroken.

Let us return in an unemotional moment and look dispassionately at the great Crucifixion in the Chapel. One perceives now that it has some striking defects, though at no time is it other than a noble work, simple and direct beyond the artist's wont. The form upon the Cross, moulded with a dignity of feeling and a tragic power rare in Andrea della Robbia, claims all the attention ; the saints and angels are quite subordinate, and fortunately we hardly notice the foolish sun and moon which some strange lapse of taste has induced the artist to admit above. But the effect of the central figure is much spoilt by the green used to give the appearance of death, and by the red hair and beard and the yellow of the cross, a realism of colour incongruous with the rest of the composition in idea and sentiment, and responsible for the conjecture of some writers, supported by a local tradition, that the original figure had been broken through some accident and this substituted for it by the later school. But a recent critic,[1] appeals, among other arguments, to the masterly character of the modelling in proof of its genuineness. One may also object to the saints that they lack im-

[1] See Cruttwell, *Luca and Andrea della Robbia*, p. 168.

pressiveness and depth of feeling when viewed closely. St. John is a very beautiful figure, but his show of grief is not very convincing, and the Madonna is singularly cold and unmoved. The kneeling St. Francis and St. Jerome are of the gentle and plaintive type in which Andrea is accustomed to portray those two great spirits, and though the angels are individually beautiful, their expression is somewhat over-emphasised. There is in the whole work something rather theatrical. Signs of the co-operation of the artist's sons have been pointed out, and perhaps to the taste of Giovanni is due the border of flowers and fruits outside the usual surrounding of cherubs, a decoration continually used by him and the whole school afterwards.

But the real interest of this great work of art must always be in its spiritual significance. It must have been produced about the time when Savonarola's great religious revival was shaking all Florence, and it seems to throw a light on the attitude of the artistic spirits of the Renaissance towards that movement. It was through their wonderfully developed sense of beauty that the religious impulse reached them. Their æsthetic sensibility rose from appreciation of outward forms to enjoyment of spiritual ideas. In Andrea's angels I seem to see all that fashionable world, if I may so call it, of Florence, with its exquisite sensibilities, its grace, its culture, its curls, acknowledging a higher beauty, bowing down before the infinite nobility and dignity of the naked God

upon the Cross ; moved to the heart, forgetful of self, absorbed in sorrow and adoration before the image of the Divine Idea.

The Chiesa Maggiore, the principal church upon the Rock, was founded in 1348 by Conte Tarlato di Pietramala and his wife, Contessa Giovanna di Santa Fiora, as may be learnt from an old inscription upon the façade. The Tarlati, who had possessed themselves at this time of Chiusi, the castle close by, once the seat of Count Orlando and his House, were as zealous in their devotion to the stigmatised saint as the Guidi had been. Their benefactions to La Verna were in proportion to the devastation and misery which their greed and tyranny wrought in the country round. The church was only half finished when its founders died, and the piety of their heirs was not equal to parting with the fifteen hundred ducats which they bequeathed to carry on the work. It was not till 1459 that by the help of the Arte della Lana of Florence it was finished. The gothic design of the earlier builders was not carried out by the later ones, and the church has no remarkable architectural distinction, but it is spacious and dignified, and very richly decorated with Della Robbia works, presented by various patrons. There are no less than seven of these in this one church, including the medallion with the emblem of the Arte della Lana, in the roof. The two that claim attention first are the Annunciation and Nativity by Andrea della Robbia, the one in the

Niccolini Chapel on the left hand, the other in the corresponding chapel on the right, founded by Jacopo Brizzi in 1478. The Annunciation is generally considered one of Andrea's finest works and that in which he approaches most nearly to his master, Luca. Its noble simplicity and devout feeling impress one deeply at first. The attitude and the whole outward presentment of the Virgin are the perfect embodiment of meekness and loveliness; her hands are a marvel of exquisite modelling, her draperies of simple and graceful arrangement. It is only after contemplating this beautiful figure for a while that one begins to feel a certain poverty of soul in her. The angel is also of great beauty, but a little over curled. He seems to lack animation; no swiftness of wings just folded, nothing of the hurry and eagerness of the newly-lighted messenger disturbs his faultless equanimity. Both he and the Virgin seemed to have stayed as they are some time. On the other hand the little group in the sky is an unnecessary interruption to the holy quiet of the scene. But the whole setting of the work is chaste and restrained. The frame is ornamented with a simple floral pattern, and the colour is white on blue only, with a touch of green in the lily. One of its great beauties is the wonderful quality and colour of the surface. The thick glossy enamel seems to give fluidity and smoothness to the folds of the drapery; they fall and lie with the richness of the creamy spume which edges the waves upon a sandy seashore.

The arms of the donors, the Niccolini of Florence, who built the chapel, are on the predella.

The more homely Madonna of the Nativity charms one hardly less than the Annunziata just looked at. She has a simple childlike grace, void of self-consciousness, and her attitude as she bends over the Babe is very touching. The theme of this altar-piece achieved a great popularity; it appeals to a sentiment common to all, and followers of the artist have familiarised us with it in numberless imitations. In this, the original version, the beauty of the scene is disturbed by the figure of God the Father and by the choir of angels, which overcrowd the composition and detract from its simplicity and effectiveness. They appear to have been executed by an inferior and coarser hand.[1]

In a chapel just above the altar with the Annunciation, the Cappella Ridolfi, there is a large representation of the Ascension, by Giovanni della Robbia,[2] one of the finest works of this artist. Giovanni differs greatly in style from his father Andrea. He is of robuster and at the same time coarser character, and shows the more florid taste of the cinquecento. Instead of the refined and gentle types used by Andrea, he moulds broad and heavy figures, and the religious sentiment of the older master is replaced in him by a love of sensuous and earthly beauty. The new

[1] See Cruttwell, *Luca and Andrea della Robbia*, p. 170.

[2] In giving the authors of these works I have followed the attributions of Miss Cruttwell in her work already referred to.

development which took place in the Della Robbia arts by the introduction of elaborate backgrounds and accessories, realistically coloured, into the pieces, converting a plastic medium from its proper use to serve pictorial ends, was chiefly owing to him. But in this Ascension he adheres to the old traditions in colour and arrangement. The work has been often attributed to Andrea, but the type of the Christ, a majestic figure, and the homely, realistic and individualised heads of the apostles are characteristic of Giovanni. The Madonna del Rifugio, over an altar on the right lower down the church, is also by Giovanni ; it is a rather uninteresting and conventional piece, with an insipid Virgin and characterless figures of SS. Antony, Onofrio and Francis, and a frowning Magdalen. There are also in the church two figures of St. Antony and St. Francis, in niches, in the manner of Andrea.

In the sacristy is to be seen a reliquary of delicate gothic workmanship, containing a wooden bowl from which San Francesco ate, and a glass goblet said to have been given to him by Count Orlando, but hardly antique enough in appearance for such an early date. A very sacred fragment of linen rag, stained with the blood from the wounds of the Saint, is also preserved here, and there are some very fine embroidered vestments and altar furniture of the seventeenth century, presented by the Convent of Santo Spirito at Florence.

Outside the church, in a little chapel at the end of

the loggia, close to the entrance to the long corridor, popularly called the Cappella del Conte Checco, in remembrance of its founder, Count Francesco Montedoglio, we come across another Della Robbia altarpiece, this time a late and very coarse inferior work, a Pietà, gaudy and vulgar in feeling. There is also in the refectory of the convent, invisible to women visitors, a Madonna and Child of the school of Andrea della Robbia.

The Piazza is adorned with some modern monuments in honour of the patron saint, but they lack the feeling of the mediæval so essential to one's idea of the Poverello. This is supplied however by the living figures of the Brothers, who, as they pass backwards and forwards in their simple habits, girded with the three-knotted cord, revive the thirteenth century and its poetic enthusiasm and devotion before our eyes. Beside the picturesque sixteenth century well, a door leads into the *Foresteria*, the rooms reserved for strangers. Here Padre Fortunato, the Forestaio, who keeps the keys of the gate, receives and entertains the visitor with the utmost kindliness and thoughtfulness, bringing forth of his best to stay the appetite which the mountain air has sharpened.

One of the most interesting spectacles at La Verna is the dark stone chamber in the Foresteria, just within the great entrance, where the poor folk, who are never lacking here, gather for shelter if the rain falls or the wind blows cold without. Here you may

see a crowd of hoary elders with bowed shoulders and deep-seamed visages, crones with their heads bound in sybil fashion, young peasants with little bundles, on their way across the mountains into the Romagna, children, ragged and merry, all crouched and chattering within the vast black chimney-place, where they stir up a heap of smouldering twigs into a blaze, veiling themselves in a cloud of blue smoke.

Outside the precincts of the convent the primæval forest reigns undisturbed as in the days of the first Brothers, sweeping down into misty depths on the south, and northwards rising up to the precipitous summit of La Penna. To this highest point of the Rock, Francesco doubtless often ascended. And here one seems to find him again with a more subtle realisation than amid the thaumaturgic wonders of the sanctuaries. His feet must have passed up the way one goes to-day, hurt by these same stones, comforted by mosses like these, caressed by delicate pink cyclamen growing as one sees them now in slim tufts between the boulders. The same mysteries of the woodland were around him, weird growths, distorted shapes, things with strange eyes in shadowed places, voices that whispered in unknown tongues overhead. But to him all was consecrate by love. *Praised be Thou, O Lord, for our sister, the Earth, who not only gives us sustenance, but brings forth also coloured flowers and herbs.* You mount up beneath the solemn shade of the great beeches and pines, and presently find yourself on the

edge of a dreadful precipice, over which, no doubt, the devil used to try in vain to hurl the saint. Up in these airy heights I fancy that perpetual contest must have become a kind of game, and the antagonists must have found that they had mistaken each other and that the Prince of the Air and the Soul of Man were both the merry sprites of God, paired in the eternal dance.

Here a great fragment of rock, detached from the mountain side, rears itself precipitously from the ravine, with just a little space for a foothold upon it. It is called the Sasso di Fra Lupo. The story-tellers relate that when Francesco first came to La Verna the mountain was infested by a very wicked brigand, who robbed travellers that passed below, and compelled those that resisted to cross on to this giddy crag by a plank thrown over the abyss, and kept them there till they yielded to his demands. The people named him Lupo, the Wolf. But the Brothers had no fear of him, Holy Poverty was their protector. The robber, however, feared them, the heralds of love and peace, and did his utmost to drive them away. But one day Francesco went to meet him and talk with him, and in a very short time tamed his rude heart, and brought him to such deep repentance, that he abandoned his trade of robber and turned Brother Minor. He showed such gentleness and meekness in his new calling that Francesco changed his name from Wolf into Lamb, and he was ever afterwards known as Fra Agnello.

And so you continue upward, mounting the

painful steep till at last you win the utmost summit, La Penna, and stand as it seems on the sheer edge of the world, thrust out into the abyss of space. A vast and glorious prospect is before you, rolling away to where in the extreme distance the land is bound by the Adriatic sea. Eastward you look upon the mountains which nurse the infant Tiber and can trace the course of the Valle Tiberina running southwards within the misty folds of the hills. Many a distant city and landmark of fame may be descried. But one cares little for geographical particulars in this place.

For here, too, Francesco has been before us. Where his foot trod a little chapel has not failed to spring up. One could have wished a soaring beech instead. Thought can only occupy itself with him, who had climbed so fast and far, changing wolves into lambs as he passed, leaving behind him a garden where he found a wilderness, yet never staying his foot, but always soaring upwards, singing like the lark that goes to salute the rising sun; casting off all the trappings of earth and hasting naked to meet the naked truth; rising in love through death to life. Here at last the climbing feet could go no further. And already it must have seemed like Heaven around him; the pastures of the Holy Valley far below, more pale, more delicate than any green of this world, walled with rocks of jasper or fine gold. And beyond, clothed in celestial blue, beautiful and insubstantial as an allegoric

scene, lay spread out the region of his earthly endeavours, the valleys and marches where he had wandered foot-sore and eager, the castles whither he had breathlessly ascended, to gather in his harvest of souls. There, far beneath him now and overpast, were his sorrows, his yearnings, his fears. Lifted up here next the Empyrean, he could rest content; around him only the things which endure, the everlasting hills, the silence, God.

La Verna, this seeming abode of peace, has not escaped altogether the vicissitudes of history. After the first establishment of the convent, it suffered from the diminution of zeal which set in among the followers of the stigmatised saint and from the bitter fraternal quarrel which soon divided them. The sacred Rock remained in the possession of the Frati Conventuali, who represented the original Order, but by accepting privileges and modifications of the rule from successive Popes had early given up the true Franciscan ideal. After a time they grew so lax, that disorders and scandals occurred, and in 1431 Pope Eugenius IV. turned them out and installed in their stead the other branch of the Order, the Osservanti, or Brothers of the Strict Observance, who had adhered to the original rule. Then was seen the shameful spectacle of war and conflict upon the Mons Felix. The evicted Friars, gathering together their friends and neighbours in the Valley, assaulted the Rock and drove out the new-comers. They were, however, once

more ousted and the Osservanti restored, and not long afterwards Florence took the convent under her protection, giving it a year later into the charge of the Arte della Lana. These events are marked by the "stemme" sculptured upon the doorway leading into the interior of the convent; the arms of Eugenius IV. with the Triple Crown; the Cross of the Florentine people; the Florentine Lily; and the emblem of the Arte della Lana, the Lamb with the Banner.

In 1498 d'Alviano and his Venetian troops occupied La Verna and committed horrible desecrations of all the holy places. They were virtually besieged there by the Florentines and the people around and were soon reduced to dreadful straits, and after four months were compelled to abandon the mount and later to retreat altogether from the Casentino.

In course of time the Osservanti themselves grew lax, and in 1625 they were replaced by the Padri Riformati, a reformed branch of the order, who are still in possession. In 1810 the convent was threatened with suppression by the Napoleonic Government, and the Brothers had already bidden farewell with bitter tears to the Rock, but they were allowed to return and keep the convent as a hospice for travellers.

The community has escaped the fate which has fallen since on the religious houses of Italy, as the Municipality of Florence succeeded in making good a claim to the possession of the mountain, and now

allows the Brothers to remain in their ancient home as its tenants.

In the course of the year many thousand persons visit the monastery. The indulgences attached to the various sanctuaries attract a great concourse of pilgrims, especially on the 17th of September, when the churches of La Verna share the privileges conceded to Sta. Maria degli Angeli at Assisi for the great Perdono. Then the good Brothers are hard pressed to house their men guests in the Foresteria, or rooms reserved for strangers in the convent, and to find room for all the women in the hospice built specially for their reception and presided over by sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis, at La Beccia, the tiny hamlet at the foot of the Rock. For after nightfall no woman may remain within the great gate of the convent.

In the vision of that long procession that has passed up the mountain without break through so many centuries what mighty shades appear! Saints and doctors of the Church, Antony of Padua, Bonaventura, Bernardino, Thomas Aquinas, cardinals destined to wear the triple crown, that tragic figure of an idealist, the Emperor Henry VII., and princes without number since, and bringing up the mighty file, a crowned Italian head at last, the gracious Queen Mother Margherita.

And among the thousands and tens of thousands of unrecorded pilgrims surely there comes early in the line a certain sad wanderer in the Valley below, whose

name, robbed then by poverty and misfortune of its rights, recorded now, would, by its comparison, silence all those written above. He who must daily through the winter of his discontent have looked up to the *rude rock between Tiber and Arno* and read the message which it bore for his proud soul, assuredly did not fail to ascend and kneel in the sanctuary of the man whom the love of poverty had carried so high and seeming despite could not weigh down. The figure of the poet, who bore the stigmata of the world's scorn and misunderstanding, and of that sharper martyrdom which is the life of the creating spirit, is alone worthy to be remembered here beside the poet martyr of love, he who

> "On the rude rock between Tiber and Arno
> from Christ received the final seal."

At the lower end of the Rock, not a mile from the convent, are the ruins of Count Orlando's castle of Chiusi. The walk there leads through the delicious pastures which border the mount at its foot and are edged by shining streams that foam down their rocky ravines into green valleys far below. The picturesque village of Chiusi, of some importance when held by powerful barons, lies now in sunny peace beneath the hill. It used to be regarded, on Vasari's authority, as the birthplace of Michael Angelo, whose father, Lodovico Buonarotti, was Podestà of Chiusi and Caprese at the time of the great sculptor's birth. But

of late Caprese, which lies on the eastern side of the mountain, seven or eight miles away, in the Valle Tiberina, has, I believe, made good a rival claim, and the glory of having produced that stupendous genius is taken away from the Casentino.

The Castle stands above the village, at the very end of the long Rock, which here drops abruptly into the Valley. A "castle precipice," in good sooth, with walls that embattle the natural wall of rock. Southwards it looks across the deep valley, and between mountain heights beyond to a fair distant world of gentle blue hills sparkling with habitations, pleasant quarry for the hawk's eye in this rocky nest to mark. This rock monster which bore San Francesco on its brow, carried, one sees, a sting in its tail. Strange juxtaposition of the palaces of peace and of strife, outward and visible sign of the stranger twinship of love and wrath in the mediæval mind. The gentle Count Orlando and his House were succeeded in the dominion of Chiusi by the fiercer races of the Ubertini and the Tarlati in turn, and for a short time the Guidi of Bagno ruled here, but in 1404 Florence took possession of the castle and installed a Podestà in it to rule the district round.

Nothing but shattered walls remain of the stronghold. Beneath it there clings a little church, and a steep path zigzags down to the valley, whither the inhabitants wended long ago for good, abandoning the windy crag to solitude. I met no living thing up there, except a tall, meagre, sociable pig. One might think

that Circe had her pastures here too; but no, this altitude is no place for her wiles. You stand on a ridge between two worlds. On your left, a pale, strange barren country, breaking in shelves and slopes of ashen rock, waterless, without tree or bush or blade of grass upon it. Yet in the people's eyes it is blessed, not cursed: witness its name, the *Vallesanta*, the Holy Valley. It is the same allegoric world that you look on from the Penna. And on your right what a contrasting scene! The sparkle and richness of deep valleys, of leafy trees, of coloured flowers and herbs, of silver streams.



BESIDE THE ARNO

CHAPTER VIII

DANTE IN THE VALLEY

"Since it was the pleasure of the citizens of the fairest and most famous daughter of Rome, Fiorenza, to cast me out from her most sweet bosom . . . through almost all the parts whereto this tongue extends, a pilgrim, almost begging, have I gone, showing, against my will, the wound of fortune, which is wont often to be unjustly imputed to the wounded one. Verily I have been a bark without sail and without helm carried to divers ports and straits and shores by the harsh wind which grievous poverty breathes, and have appeared mean in the eyes of many, who peradventure because of a certain fame had imagined me in different guise."—*Convivio*, i. 3.

A PORTION, possibly considerable, of that most tragic exile was passed in the Casentino. But long before, in the yet happy days of his youth, Dante, "in different guise," had known the Valley, when as one of a brilliant band of Florentine gentlemen and in the company among others of Bernardino da Polenta, brother of the ill-fated Francesca, and other noble friends of the Republic, he had ridden over the mountains and taken his place among the *feditori* in

the front rank of the Guelf army at Campaldino. His biographer, Leonardo Bruni, speaks of certain letters, no longer to be found, in which the poet described the battle, and in another place mentioned again "the battle of Campaldino in which the Ghibelline party was almost wholly destroyed and undone ; at which I myself was present, no longer an apprentice in arms, and had great anxiety and in the end very great gladness by reason of the varying haps of that battle."

His early experiences of warfare colour many passages of the *Divine Comedy*, and it is generally supposed that this campaign in the Casentino was in his mind when he wrote of the swift riders spurring out across the Aretine country,

"Corridor vidi per la terra vostra, o Aretini,"

and of the bustle and joyous sports and devastating forays of a victorious army (*Inferno*, C. xxii., vv. 1-6). Villani's account of the movements of the Florentines after the battle, the sounding of the retreat to those in pursuit of the enemy, the assault on Bibbiena, the wasting of the country, the *palio* run beneath the walls of Arezzo on the day of San Giovanni, read almost like a paraphrase of the passage in the poem.

In the touching episode of Buonconte da Montefeltro the poet has given us another and very different picture of Campaldino. That wonderful narrative is so instinct with personal feeling and experience that

it may well remove any doubt of Dante's presence at the battle. The impression of that tremendous day must have remained deeply printed upon his mind through all the years that elapsed before the writing of the passage, in which we feel still vivid the chivalrous admiration of the young warrior for a noble foe, mingled with the wonder roused by that mysterious death and the awe of an actual storm sweeping with the fury of devils over the dead calm of the field where the angels had already gleaned.

The interest and compassion of the young poet, expressed long after in the pathos of those exquisite verses, were the tribute of one noble soul to the sorrow of another. Dante himself, one of the elated victors, sharing in the triumph of that city in whose *most sweet bosom* he had been *born and nurtured*, the companion of her rarest minds and already famous among them, had at that time no outward need of compassion, no tears for himself, except for the inward woe of a poet soul. It is the memory of his later days that is poignant in the Casentino, when in the long-drawn-out sorrow of his exile he had time to gain that knowledge of the Valley and its places and inhabitants which appears in his writings. As has been often pointed out, no family is so often mentioned in his pages as the Guidi of the Casentino. They must have entered considerably into his life, and we may assume as a certainty that he stayed in one or more of their castles in the Valley, though there is no precise record of the fact. Boccaccio in

his life of Dante names Conte Selvatico in Casentino as one of the hosts with whom he passed certain years of his exile, and says that he was held in much honour, as far as consorted with the times and with the power of his host. Count Guido Salvatico of Dovadola is no doubt the person alluded to, but since this Baron and his son Ruggero were both fierce partisans of the "Black" faction which had banished the poet, the statement does not seem very probable.

Tradition, still less trustworthy, is rich in particulars of Dante's sojourn in the various castles. But his own canzone, *Amor, dacché convien pur ch' io mi doglia*, written most certainly in the Valley, is a surer testimony of his presence there, and there are also the two famous political letters, subscribed "on the borders of Tuscany, beneath the source of Arno"—*sub fonte Sarni*—"in the first year of the auspicious progress of Henry the Cæsar to Italy," that is in 1311.

But long before this he had undoubtedly sought refuge in the Casentino. It was in 1302 that Dante Alighieri was first exiled. The circumstances of his great calamity have been often told. The poet, who took an active part in public life in Florence, had been elected one of the Priors during the previous autumn. The city was at the time in a crisis of the feud between the Bianchi and the Neri, the two factions into which the Guelf party had split, after the complete overthrow of their common enemy, the Ghibellines, at Campaldino. Dante, who used afterwards to attribute all his

misfortunes to his tenure of office, did his utmost to restore peace to the distracted state, and though himself one of the Bianchi, joined with his fellow Priors in sending the chiefs of both factions into exile, not sparing his *primo amico* Guido Cavalcanti, whose health was so frail that it was to him a sentence of death.

But Dante made for himself a relentless enemy in Rome,

"Là dove Cristo tutto dì si merca,"

by resisting the attempts of Boniface VIII. to manage Florentine affairs, and his impartiality availed him nothing when Corso Donati and the other Neri, having strengthened themselves by a vile compact with the Pope and Charles of Valois, re-entered the city in arms, and favoured by the French prince, who had come to Florence under pretext of restoring peace, massacred a number of their unresisting rivals and drove out the rest. In the proscription of the Bianchi which followed Dante was charged with *barratry*, that is, fraudulent and corrupt dealings in office, and was condemned unheard to confiscation and exile. A still harsher sentence, a few months later, doomed him to death by fire if he came within the power of the Commune.

The poet, aware of the ruthless temper of his foes, was out of their clutches, having fled before the promulgation of the first sentence. Whither we cannot tell. The exiled Bianchi gathered together in Arezzo, Siena, Bologna and other cities hostile to

Florence. They made common cause with the Ghibelline barons in Tuscany, including the Conti Guidi of Porciano and of Romena, and probably many of them harboured in the castles of their allies. Porciano, Romena and other mountain homes of the Guidi would have been open to them. We have a fleeting glimpse of Dante before long afforded by a still existing document in which his name appears with those of the chiefs of the party as a signatory to a contract of alliance made with the Ubaldini on the 8th of June 1302 in the choir of the church at San Godenzo, a castle of the Guidi.[1] This shows that Dante had thrown in his lot with the other Bianchi, and was taking an active part in their plans for wresting the city from their enemies. It is exceed-

[1] San Godenzo, which is closely connected historically with the Casentino, and is peculiarly interesting from its association with Dante, lies on the north-east of Monte Falterona, in a side valley opening into the Mugello, upon a tributary of the Sieve. You look down upon it from the top of the mountain. It is accessible from Stia, in fine weather, over the hills on foot or on horseback, an expedition of about six hours for good walkers. It is very probable that Dante passed this way, perhaps more than once, between Porciano and the castle of the Conti Guidi at San Godenzo. The little town stands picturesquely upon the slope of a hill, between two streams. No traces exist now of walls or of the castle, in which Count Tegrimo of Porciano received the Emperor Henry VII. The church, however, which is perhaps the only place of which it may be said with certainty that here the exiled Dante stood on such a day of such a year—when he signed the document mentioned in the text—still remains, partly modernised, but showing its original Romanesque proportions and massive square pilasters. The choir is raised high above a fine crypt, which is quite unspoilt.

ingly likely that he was in the Casentino during these early days of exile. Alessandro and Aghinolfo of Romena were zealous supporters of the excluded party, and Leonardo Bruni says that the first was made Captain of the Council of twelve which managed the affairs of the Bianchi, and of which, according to the same authority, Dante was a member. A letter addressed by Alessandro Capitaneus, as the A. CA. of the manuscript is understood to signify, and by the Council and Body of the Bianchi to Cardinal Niccolò da Prato, Pope Benedict XI.'s messenger of peace to Florence, thanking him for his good intentions towards their country and promising to lay down their swords and leave the differences between them and their adversaries to his judgment, has been supposed to have been drawn up by Dante. The evidence of this does not, however, amount at all to certainty. Nor is there the slightest necessity to believe that he wrote the much-discussed letter of condolence, sometimes attributed to him, addressed to Oberto and Guido da Romena, on the death of their uncle, Alessandro, and was thus guilty of the gross contradiction which appears between the laudatory terms of the epistle and his condemnation of the Count and his brothers as falsifiers in the *Inferno*. There is nothing whatever in the letter to connect it with Dante. But he was certainly in intimate relations at one time with the Guidi of Romena, and there can be little doubt that he found refuge for a while within

the castle, of which the three desolate survivors of the fourteen towers are all that is left on the pointed hill-top to-day. He probably served his hosts well with brain and pen. We do not know the circumstances which caused him later to expose them to infamy in his poem, but may rest assured that he was fully justified.

Meanwhile the Bianchi were meeting with misfortune. Many were taken and slain in various conflicts with the Neri, and in 1303 they were disastrously defeated at Pulicciano. The following year their daring surprise attack upon Florence from Lastra ended in utter discomfiture and in the final defeat of their hopes of regaining their lost homes and possessions. But we learn from that sad passage of his biography which the poet puts into the prophetic mouth of his ancestor, Cacciaguida (*Paradiso*, C. xvii., v. 66), that he had no part in this last shame.

"Ella, non tu, n'avrà rossa la tempia."

He had most probably already severed himself from that *compagnia malvogia e scempia*, that "wicked and foolish company" with which he had fallen into the vale of misfortune, and who were more grievous to him than the salt bread and hard paths of banishment, for they were become all ungrateful, mad and pitiless towards him.

"Che tutta ingrata, tutta matta ed empia
si farà contro a te. . . ."

The circumstances of his rupture with his

companions and the exact cause of their malice towards him are not known, but it is easy to divine the nature of the difference. We can imagine that great scornful spirit, occupied with lofty ideas, conscious of large and far-off issues, impatient of mean and deceitful ways, how alone it dwelt amid this crowd of selfish passions and ambitions, of petty schemes of revenge, of weak, conflicting and short-sighted counsels. His tongue, which lacked the genial charm that wins men, but was a quick and fiery instrument of retort and of imprecation, would not have been restrained by any fear or respect of persons from urging unpopular views or mercilessly chastising the vices and weaknesses which spoiled the enterprises of the party. How much ineptitude there was among them is shown by the story of their failures, and Dante was not one to suffer fools gladly. Moreover, within him was the great soul's consciousness of its own merit, and his spirit, endowed with more than its share of thirteenth century rashness and fire, was vexed by the diminished respect of those childish persons who, as he tells us, were the greater part of men, and who, judging only by appearances, despised him because his poverty deprived him of that external dignity which they had expected of his fame. It was not natural that a mind at once so passionate and so ideal should work harmoniously in practical affairs with ordinary self-seeking men.

Cacciaguida's words give some colour to the conjecture that Dante had to fly from the vengeance of

his comrades. Where he betook himself we do not know, but he appears, from his own testimony in the *Convivio*, to have wandered all over Italy in a state of extreme poverty, sometimes perhaps lacking even bread, and compelled—oh, proud soul!—to beg. We cannot tell in what remote mountain places he was fain sometimes to shelter, or of what poor and gentle peasant folk to ask for sustenance. It would have been given with ready loving-kindness and with no thought of scorn, but as one brother gives to another. Such charity was rarer at the courts in which he sought hospitality, but in some of these he was received according to his merit, notably by *the great Lombard* Bartolommeo della Scala, whose courtesy was his *first refuge and first hostelry*. Verona, Bologna and Padua were all included in his travels in the first years after parting from the Bianchi, and in 1306 the noble house of Malaspina gave him a generous welcome in the Lunigiana, which he rewarded afterwards by a splendid tribute in the *Purgatorio* (C. viii., vv. 121-132). Nothing is known of his movements during the following years up to 1311, but there is much reason to suppose that he was in the Casentino at least part of the time. The *Convivio* and the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* were apparently written in this period, possibly in the Valley. The feeling expressed in them towards Florence shows the writer to have lost something of his first indignation against the unjust city and to have found a certain degree of tranquillity and consolation

in philosophical study. But he had not forgotten his grief, as the references in these books to his exile show; in none of his writings is there any word more poignantly sad than that little sentence used as an example of style in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia: I grieve for all the sorrowful, but greatest pity have I for those, who languishing in exile, revisit their country only in their dreams.*

About this time he appears to have addressed an appeal to his fellow citizens for reconciliation and re-admission to his home. This epistle, which is now lost, began: *Oh, my people, what have I done unto thee.* But it did not touch the hearts of the party in power, who were the more enraged with him for having become as they considered a Ghibelline, and there seemed no hope that his sentence would ever be annulled.

So the years went on, and gradually the poet's condition seems to have improved as his genius made itself more widely recognised. In 1310 his voice, long silent on political questions, is uplifted again for the public weal with a new power and grandeur. The lately elected Emperor Henry VII. was about to descend the Alps to pacify the differences of his Italian lieges and the dying courage of the Florentine exiles was quickened into fresh life. What this event signified for Dante must be learnt from his treatise, *De Monarchia*, in which he sets forth his ideal conception of the temporal monarchy and its mission of

guiding the world to universal peace, and shows how by divine appointment it is vested in the Holy Roman Empire and in the prince who for the time being occupies the seat of Cæsar. To his ardent imagination which conceived of mighty ends, but was too great and too impatient to trace the long and sinuous ways by which men creep towards them, Henry of Luxemburg was in virtue of his divine authority to heal all the wounds and divisions of unhappy Italy, and by restraining the usurpations of the Papacy to re-establish the balance ordained between the temporal and spiritual powers on earth by God, from Whom both proceed. In a letter to the Princes and Peoples of Italy, full of the joy of this great expectation, he hails the moment of the Emperor's coming as the acceptable time in which appear the signs of consolation and peace, the dawn of a new day dispelling already the shades of their long calamity, the sun of peace arising, which, with the light of its rays, shall satisfy all those who live in hunger and in thirst. In exalted terms he predicts the clemency of the new Augustus for those that seek pardon, and his judgment upon the presumptuous and the evildoers, and exhorts his hearers to receive with humility and reverence, as their lord, him whose garden and lake the whole world is, and to submit themselves to his rule.

This letter gives no intimation of the place where it was written, but it may very possibly have been the Casentino. Early in the following year Dante

was certainly in the Valley, the two famous epistles, indited *sub fonte Sarni*, being dated respectively in March and April 1311. How tragically changed is the tenor of his words now. The high and joyful hope of the year before, which left no room in his mind for doubt of its fulfilment, has turned into deepest indignation, the exhortation into fulminating denunciation. The hero was indeed come and had received the iron crown at Milan; Dante had himself knelt before him at Pisa and saluted him in heart in terms of the most sacred imagery. *Behold the Lamb of God. Behold who hath taken away the sins of the world.* Henry had shown a noble conception of the great nature of his mission. But Italy, instead of welcoming her saviour, had armed herself to make his labour in vain. Above all, Florence had filled up the cup of her iniquities by leading the resistance against him at the head of a hostile federation of Guelf cities, seeing in him through the practical eyes of her merchants and shopkeepers no minister of God but a foreign tyrant, menacing their liberty to buy and sell, eat, drink and play as they would. It is to his fellow citizens that the poet now addresses himself; *Dante Alighieri a Florentine, and an exile contrary to his merits, to the most wicked Florentines within.* The exalted enthusiasm of his noble political creed, the thwarted energy of a mighty will, the growing apprehension of possible failure and disappointment combine to give scathing force to this rebuke of the heedless

city. He prophesies awful and immediate ruin upon that most arrogant race which inhabits it, unless they repent without delay and submit themselves meekly to the representative of the Roman Empire, by which the compassionate providence of God has disposed that all human things should be governed. He laughs to scorn their preparations for defence. "What shall it avail to have girt you with a vallum and to have fortified you with outworks and battlements, when, terrible in gold, that eagle shall swoop down on you who, soaring now over the Pyrenees, now over Caucasus, now over Atlas, ever strengthened by the breathing of the soldiery of heaven, looked down of old upon vast oceans in his flight?" They are to cherish no vain hope of pardon, for mercy, which ever accompanieth his army, shall flee away in wrath, and where they think to uphold the roof of false liberty, there shall they fall instead into the dungeons of slavery. He foretells their anguish as they gaze upon their defences ruined and consumed by fire, "upon the grievous sight of your temples thronged with the daily concourse of the matrons, given up to the spoiler; and of your wondering and unknowing little ones, destined to expiate the sins of their sires." He brands them as vainest of all the Tuscans, insensate alike by nature and ill custom, and deplores the blindness and lust which hold them back from the observance of the sacred laws, since they alone are free who of their own will obey the law.

Finally apostrophising his hearers as the most wretched offspring of the Fiesolani, the new Carthaginian barbarians, he points out, in order, as he says, that the streams of fear and grief may mingle in the bitterness of repentance, that this divine and triumphant Henry had undertaken his arduous task for the public weal and for no end of his own, freely sharing in the sufferings of the Italian people. He boldly applies to him the words of Isaiah : *truly he hath borne our weakness and hath carried our woes*, and concludes with a solemn warning that the hour is at hand when repentance will be too late.

But his people would not hear him even now, deaf to the deep love and yearning over them which the harsh words concealed. The avenging Eagle was arrested in his progress by the long resistance of heroic Brescia, and Dante, impatient for the long-delayed consummation, sitting in fevered idleness on some hill-top of the Casentino, and waxing ever hotter with indignation as the obstinacy of his fellow countrymen continued to baffle his hopes, uttered himself in a second epistle, which he addressed this time to Henry himself. If before he scourged the recalcitrant Florentines with whips, now he used scorpions. The flood of his wrath sweeps down with the cataclysmic fury of the Apennine storms amid which he was dwelling, as with examples drawn from biblical and classic lore he reproves the Emperor for lingering in Lombardy in the vain attempt to destroy the poisonous hydra of the northern

cities, and hounds him on to the attack of the real offender, the stinking fox that pollutes the streams of Arno, the dire plague named Florence, the viper which turns against the bosom of the mother, the sick sheep which contaminates the flock by her contagion, the abominable and impious Myrrha, the raving Amata who, despising the lawful king and adoring the idol of her wilfulness, ends by hanging herself in the noose. Let the Emperor take to himself courage from the eyes of the Lord God of Sabaoth, before whom he stands, and let him prostrate this Goliath with the sling of his wisdom and the stone of his strength, that the Philistines may flee and Israel may be delivered. "And even as we now groan, remembering the holy Jerusalem, exiles in Babylon, so then, citizens, breathing again in peace, we shall look back in our joy upon the miseries of our perplexity."

But for Florence the Lord was not in the great and strong wind, in the earthquake, or the fire. Maybe the still small voice spake to her, but it was not Dante's. She had to work out her own salvation, and though the end might be that which he looked for, the long way through the centuries to come was hidden from him and she had no need at that time for her noblest son. She answered his denunciations by condemning him anew and making his banishment perpetual.

And now he had to watch the slow destruction of his hopes; the prince, who was to restore calm to the troubled waters, stirring them up to worse fury, using

the base means of tyranny and cruelty to work his high ends, and bringing not peace but a sharpened sword. This noble Henry was himself both the priest and the sacrifice at the altar of his high enterprise. We cannot tell whether it was still from the Casentino that Dante looked on at that fine display of constancy through difficulties, privations, heavy personal loss and grievous bodily affliction, which ended, a year after the futile and ignominious attempt against Florence, in the sudden death of the Emperor at a wayside convent near Siena.

By this event every expectation of the exiles was utterly extinguished. The footsteps of the poet are lost again for several years after 1311, the year of the letters, though there seems little doubt that he was at Lucca and also at Verona during this time, and tradition says that he spent some time at the convent of Fonte Avellana. But we have no reason to suppose that he stayed again in the Casentino, where the neighbourhood of Florence would have been perhaps a danger to him, and certainly an aggravation to his grief at being now a hopeless and perpetual outcast from her gates. According to Boccaccio one chance of return to his native city was offered him later, in 1316, but with the insulting condition of doing public penance. In a letter, the authenticity of which is not certain, the poet rejects such an unworthy way of return to his country, and declares that if no path can be found which hurts not Dante's fair fame and honour, he will

never enter Florence more. "What then? May I not gaze upon the mirror of the sun and stars wherever I may be? Can I not ponder on the sweetest truths wherever I may be beneath the heaven, but I must first make me inglorious and shameful before the people and the state of Florence? Nor shall I lack for bread."

His future now assured from carking poverty by the love and esteem of noble friends, his passionate regret for his lost home calmed and chastened by the broadening years into a large and noble sorrow for all wrong and injustice, he passes out of the sphere of political strife and agitation into the spiritual realm of his great vision, in which he was to learn the interpretation of those things which he had seen and heard in his life, and to apprehend the figures of sin and repentance and blessedness in their eternal and immutable reality. Ravenna, with its great sea, its pines that sing to the silence, receives him; the Casentino, Tuscany, fretted and storm-tossed, land of hills, loses him for ever.

Though nothing is known as to Dante's actual whereabouts when he was in the Casentino, the whole Valley is penetrated with the memory and tradition of his presence. One seems to come upon his footsteps at every turn, and to lose them as often; they flee before you into the obscurity of castle or rock or forest, as elusive as that light unattainable lady of his own odes, whom he was ever pursuing, if only to catch sight

of the shadow of her vanishing garments. Sometimes standing within a ruined tower, when the phases of the past crowd upon you charged with dead passions, with memories of lives begun and lived and ended here, unprescient of the roofless days to come, with visions of long monotonous years that are now but flashes in the revolving scenes, it happens that your mind is suddenly aware of the moment when *he* stood here, leaning idly, surrounded by the friends and followers of the Count, yet alone, his soul moving in eternity, aware of the great silence, while the voices around clattered and tinkled without meaning. Or you see him wearied and irritated by the pretensions to knowledge of foolish and shallow minds, whose high place permitted no interruption or contradiction to their ignorant pratings, or bursting with scorn as he looked at his companions, knowing what men might do and be. When you mount the slopes of Falterona he is there, beside the springs of Arno, looking across to the city throned in the dim hollows, beyond the mountains which his eagle wings may not traverse, while at his feet the river winds on its despised way far round about to the goal. All the rills that run down into Arno from Romena sing of how they refreshed his ears many a time as he wearily climbed to the parched hill-top. Still more hallowed is the meeting-place of Archiano and Arno. So precisely is this spot marked out in the poet's narrative of Buonconte's death that we cannot doubt that he knew it well. The halo lingers

about it still of that large thought which, passing beyond the authority of God's vicegerent on earth, was aware of the infinite Mercy itself. Up in the lofty Eremo, also, where the stream is born which washed away Buonconte's body, his words are with us, and they accompany us still in that yet holier sanctuary upon "the rude rock between Tiber and Arno."

But there are other places, made for love idylls, green glades where flowers spring thick beside rushing rivulets, and the sun shoots golden darts between the thick leaves of the trees, in which we are haunted by the poet in a different aspect, that in which he reveals himself in the Canzoniere; not the enthusiastic dreamer of an ideal reign of justice and peace, not the eager scholar wearing his eyes blind with study, nor yet the sage pondering the great truths of judgment and salvation, but the slave of an earthly passion. There is a very beautiful ode beginning: *Amor, dacchè convien pur ch' io mi doglia*, "Love, since I needs must make complaint," in which the writer calls upon Love to give him skill to bewail as he would the torment which a fair and cruel Lady inflicts upon him. He describes the piteous plight to which she has brought him; flee as he will, her image comes within his phantasy and draws him to her, where he must die, slain by her eyes. In her presence he becomes lifeless as though struck by a thunderbolt, and, though it was a sweet smile that hurled it, yet, when his soul returns to his heart, he still trembles all over with fear, and



A Sheep Girl.

his face remains darkened from the spirit's distrust of itself.

"Così m'hai concio, Amore, in mezzo l'alpi,
nella valle del fiume,
lungo il qual sempre sopra me sei forte.
Qui vivo e morto, come vuoi, mi palpi
mercè del fiero lume,
che folgorando fa via alla morte.
Lasso! non donne qui, non genti accorte
Vegg' io, a cui incresca del mio male:
Se a costei non ne cale,
non spero mai da altrui aver soccorso:
e questa, sbandeggiata di tua corte,
Signor, non cura colpo di tuo strale;
fatto ha d'orgoglio al petto schermo tale,
ch' ogni saetta lì spunta suo corso;
per che l'armato cuor da nulla è morso.
O montanina mia Canzon, tu vai;
forse vedrai Fiorenza la mia terra
che fuor di se mi serra,
vota d'amore, e nuda di pietate.
Se dentro v'entri, va dicendo: omai
non vi puo fare il mio fattor più guerra;
là ond' io vegno una catena il serra
tal, che se piega vostra crudeltate,
non ha di ritornar più libertate." [1]

[1] Thus hast thou used me, love, amid the alps, in the valley of the river, beside the which thou art ever strong upon me. Here, living or dead, as thou wilt, thou dost handle me, thanks to the fierce light which, flashing, makes a way for death. Alas! no ladies here, no folk of wit, do I see, who will grieve them for my ills. If she care not, I have no hope of other's succour; and she, banned from thy court, Sire, heeds not the stroke of thy darts, such shield of pride hath she made for her breast that

The Casentino and Its Story

The river beside which love has ever been strong over him is of course the Arno, and its valley amid the Alps the Casentino. That the poem was written during his exile its own words reveal. So we learn that Dante in his mature years, when staying in the Casentino, was seized by a new passion. Early commentators mention the poet's love for a mountain lady and in the Compendium[1] of Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* it is related that near the close of his life the poet experienced a passion for an Alpine lady in the Casentino, "who, if I am not misinformed, though beautiful in countenance, had a goitre." This statement, however, does not bear Boccaccio's authority, and it is quite unnecessary to believe in the goitre! But the most striking commentary on the ode is a letter purporting to be written by Dante himself, and addressed to the Marchese Moroello Malaspina, apparently from the Casentino. In this he tells how on his return from the Marquis's Court to the banks of the Arno, "all at once, a lady, like lightning descending from the sky, appeared to me, I know not how . . .

every arrow there breaks its course, for her armed heart by nought is pierced.

Oh, song, my mountain one, thou goest; maybe thou'lt see my city Fiorenza, which locks me forth from her, void of love and bare of pity. If within thou enterest, go saying: now no longer can my maker war upon you; there whence I come a fetter holds him, such that though your cruelty should yield no longer hath he freedom to return.

[1] See Lawrence and Wicksteed. Translation of Witte's *Essays on Dante*, x., and Appendix.

Oh, how I was amazed by the wonder of her. But the amazement was overcome by the terror of a thunder-storm which followed. For even as the divine flashes are succeeded by thunder, so as soon as I had seen the flame of her beauty, Love, the terrible and imperious, held me in his grasp. . . ."

This letter, if genuine, would throw much light on the poet's state of mind immediately before and during the course of this sudden passion. Many Dante students, however, regard it as a forgery. It seems indeed to repeat too closely and insistently the beautiful thoughts and images of the song, and to give a circumstantiality to the episode which steals away some of its poetic grace.

This "mountain song" is usually considered to stand by itself and to be the one expression, if the letter is left out, of this love aberration of the poet's later and graver days. There is, however, a series of lyrics which have much likeness to it in tone and expression; the *rime pietrose* or "stony rhymes," so called because they harp constantly on the word *pietra*, so that some have supposed them to be addressed to a certain lady named Pietra. This is apparently a quite baseless conjecture. But that the passion, fierce, earthly and elemental in its nature, which they disclose, was felt for a real woman seems impossible to doubt, though some commentators have attempted to give them an allegorical significance, classing them with the odes which are undoubtedly written in celebration of

Philosophy. They are almost certainly some of those which the poet himself meant to treat of and interpret allegorically in the unwritten books of the *Convivio;* but that would only have been another instance of Dante's habit of conceiving a mystical and symbolic personification in the image of some earthly fair one whom he had known. Beatrice, the Lady of his noblest self, changes from the human maiden of the *Vita Nuova* into the vessel of the Divine Wisdom in the *Divina Commedia.* The Lady of the Window at the end of the narrative of the *Vita Nuova,* whose consoling eyes make him forget Beatrice, reappears in the *Convivio,* transmuted by some mental alchemy into the "daughter of God, queen of all, most noble and beauteous Philosophy." The *Convivio* was indeed in some sort an apology: he tells us himself that he was partly moved to write it by the fear of infamy; "the infamy of having pursued so great a passion as he who reads the above-named odes conceives to have had dominion over me," and there is little doubt that if he had carried out his plan, the Stony Lady would have appeared in the later books in some lofty moral guise. But the work was never finished, and in the *Purgatorio* in his after days the poet, instead of attempting to explain away his frailties, took the nobler part of confessing them with shame and repentance.

The *rime pietrose* are now generally supposed to belong to a period of moral aberration in the poet following on the death of Beatrice, and to have been

written before 1300, the date of his conversion, as represented in the *Divina Commedia*. The passion which they celebrate would then be one of the "false visions of good" for which he forsook Beatrice and the "right goal," and the *pargoletta*, whom his monitress in the earthly paradise includes among the vanities which hindered him from rising to her, might be the same as the maiden with the heart of marble in the last ode of the series. But may not Dante have intended to include his later errors in Beatrice's indictment and in his general repentance at the imaginary date of his vision? Such an anachronism in dealing with his own moral history would surely have been permissible. There can be little doubt that long after 1300 he was still astray from the ideal path which Beatrice had pointed out to him, and that she did not regain the empire of his mind till much later. The ode in celebration of the lady of the Casentino belongs in any case to a later period, and its whole tone is a contradiction to those who would deny the reality of its object and read it in an allegorical sense. It would be deeply interesting if we might believe that this same lady was also the heroine of the *rime pietrose*, and that they too belonged to the poet's exile and to the Casentino. There is much in the poems themselves which lends itself to this interpretation. Three of them are full of images of rocks and streams and hills in winter. You feel that the poet must have been in the midst of these wintry scenes as he wrote. A fourth, *Così nel mio*

parlar voglio esser aspro, in which he hisses out all the consuming rage and vindictiveness of savage desire, has in its fierce grating sound the very scrunch and scrape of furious feet grinding over the stones of the denuded hillsides. But it is the exquisite sestina of the group, *Al poco giorno*, a form of the canzone borrowed from the Provençal Arnant Daniel, which by its landscape details, if one may so call them, brings to mind especially thoughts of the Valley Enclosed. It presents a picture so incomparably lovely of the enchantress who has wounded the poet in such grievous fashion that I cannot resist giving it here, the more so as I would fain take her to be the mysterious lady of the Casentino, the *Alpigiana* herself.

"Al poco giorno, ed al gran cerchio d'ombra
son giunto, lasso! ed al bianchir de' colli,
quando si perde lo color nell' erba.
E'l mio disio però non cangia il verde,
si è barbato nella dura pietra,
che parla e sente come fosse donna.
Similemente questa nuova donna
si sta gelata, come neve all' ombra,
che non la muove, se non come pietra,
il dolce tempo, che riscalda i colli,
e che gli fa tornar di bianco in verde,
perchè gli copre di fioretti e d'erba.
Quand' ella ha in testa una ghirlanda d'erba
trae della mente nostra ogni altra donna;
perchè si mischia il crespo giallo è'l verde
sì bel, ch' Amor vi viene a stare all' ombra;
che m' ha serrato tra piccoli colli
più forte assai che la calcina pietra.

Dante in the Valley

Le sue bellezze han più virtù che pietra
e'l colpo suo non può sanar per erba;
ch' io son fuggito per piani e per colli,
per potere scampar da cotal donna;
ed al suo viso non mi può far ombra
poggio, nè muro mai, nè fronda verde.
Io l'ho veduta già vestita a verde
sì fatta, ch' ella avrebbe messo in pietra
l'amor, ch' io porto pure alla sua ombra;
ond' io l'ho chiesta in un bel prato d'erba
innamorata, com' anco fu donna,
e chiuso intorno d'altissimi colli.
Ma ben ritorneranno i fiumi a' colli
prima che questo legno molle e verde
s'infiammi, come suol far bella donna,
di me, che mi torrei dormir su pietra
tutto il mio tempo, e gir pascendo l'erba,
Sol per vedere de' suoi panni l'ombra.
Quandunque i colli fanno più nera ombra
sotto il bel verde la giovene donna
gli fa sparir, come pietra sott' erba." [1]

[1] To the short day and to the great circle of shadow am I come, alas! and to the blanching of the hills, when the colour goes from the grass. And my desire for that changes not its green so rooted is it in the hard stone, which speaks and hears as though 'twere woman.

And in like manner this new woman remains frozen, like snow within the shadow, for she is not moved any more than stone by the sweet season which warms the hills and which makes them turn from white to green because it covers them with flowers and grass.

When she has on her head a garland of grass she draws from our mind every other woman, for the curling yellow mingles with the green so sweetly, that love comes there to dwell in the shadow; who has locked me between the little hills more fast by far than the calcined stone.

Her beauty has more virtue than stone and her stroke may

The Casentino and Its Story

This *new woman*, green-garbed, with a garland of grass upon her golden head, pure and cold as the primal season of the year, swift and elusive as the flight of some shadow over the calcined rocks, is the very genius of that high snow-cooled valley, with its newly springing river and its green and flowery lawns "closed about with loftiest hills." What place could answer so well to those very words, *chiuso intorno d'altissimi colli*, as the Clusentinum, the Valley Enclosed. The form of the poem, with the continually recurring fall of the same words at the ends of the verses, has something in it suggestive of the monotonous sound of the "*ruscelletti*" of the mountains. This effect is still more pronounced in the companion ode, "*Amor, tu vedi*

not be healed by grass ; and I have fled by plain and hills that I might 'scape from such a woman ; and from her face might not give me shadow hillside nor e'er a wall or frond of green.

Ere now I have seen her vestured in green, so bedight she would have implanted in stone the love which I bear even to her shadow.

Wherefore I have wooed her in a fair meadow of grass enamoured,[1] as was ever woman, and closed around with loftiest hills.

But well may the rivers return to the hills, sooner than this wood, humid and green, shall inflame, as is the wont of fair woman, for me, who would consent to sleep on stone all my time and wander feeding on grass only to see of her garments the shadow.

Whensoever the hills make blackest shadow beneath the fair green the youthful woman makes it vanish, like stone beneath grass.

[1] Enamoured refers to the grass.

ben," a sort of double sestina, with only five rhymes, and the same word repeated twice or three times in the sequence of the lines. In this the cruelty of this lady, this semblance of a woman made of beauteous stone, is compared to the freezing cold of the wintry world, and the chill moisture of the air to his own tears. And in the final ode of the series, "*Io son venuto al punto della rota*," he shows himself still consumed by the fierce heat of passion, in the midst of the mournful snows and rains and deadened waters of the season when the birds are silent or fled, the flowers are slain upon the slopes, and all animals that are wanton in their nature are unloosed from love.

> "Canzone, or che sarà di me nell' altro
> dolce tempo novello, quando piove
> Amore in terra da tutti li cieli?
> quando per questi geli
> Amore è solo in me, e non altrove?
> Saranne quello, ch' è d'un uom di marmo,
> se in pargoletta fia per cuore un marmo."[1]

These continual images of winter, contrasted so insistently with the ever-greenness of his desire, seem to have an inner significance relating to the poet's age. "To the short day and the great circle of shadow am I come, ah me!" and still he suffers for this lady of

[1] Ode, what will now become of me, in the next sweet new season, when rains love upon the earth from all the heavens; if throughout these frosts love is in me alone and not elsewhere? That will come to me which comes to a man of marble if in the maiden, for a heart, be marble.

"*picciol tempo*"—of the few years—the sweet torment which belongs to an earlier season. If this inference were justified, it would show that these poems were written later than the period usually assigned to them, when Dante was in the ascending half of the "arch" of life, according to his own division of human age. But his entrance upon old age, which he reckons to begin at forty-five, would have come to pass in 1310, and coincides very closely with the time when he was certainly in the Casentino.

It is difficult to conceive, however, that the exiled enthusiast, watching from the mountain top the progress of his embodied hope and aspiration in the world below and sending forth his own voice of thunder into the confusion of political counsels, could have been at the same time the lover of the "stony" poems. Yet, apart from this, nothing could be more natural than that having arrived at the point fixed by himself in earlier life as the limit of manhood and beginning of old age, he should have been surprised by the youthfulness of his own feelings and should have registered the sensation in enduring verse. One may reflect perhaps that the period of Henry VII.'s enterprise was extended over a period of some length, and that even psalmists and prophets have their changing moods.

This love episode of the Casentino, whether we read it in the mountain ode alone, or amplify that with the *rime pietrose*, gives a deeply interesting glimpse of Dante at one period of his exile. This was the time in

his life when he was apparently least occupied with the thought of Beatrice and least under the influence of spiritual sentiment. The pure and beautiful flame of his *New Life* was long spent and had not yet rekindled stronger and more glorious in its transcendental form of the *Divine Comedy*. Earthly desire has him in thrall and rewards his pain by informing his art with new power and beauty. The *rime pietrose* show him at the fulness of his artistic development: "they reveal a power of art, a movement, a plasticity by which they surpass the *rime* which we already know, if in nothing else than in virile sentiment."[1]

It is impossible to say who the Lady of the Casentino was, or whether she was one of the Guidi family, as local gossips declare. Yet her personality is very real to us to-day. As one wanders in the woods and beside the little streams "which from the green hills of Casentino descend into Arno" the silence and solitude become strangely alive with the shades of the poet and the lady, the one fleeing after the other in never-ending chase. Beneath Romena, by the side of the Arno, there is a grassy place where the poplars grow slim and sparse and blossoms are thick upon the banks in spring. In such a "*bel prato d'erba*," closed around with loftiest hills, it was that he wooed her amid the love-laden flowers and herbs, and she remained cold and unmelting as the snow that lingered in the shadows of the hills, relentless as the young stream

[1] Zingarelli. *Dante.*

racing on its downward course and telling its eternal story of ever-renewed, ever-unsatisfied desire. I fancy him descending some spring morning, lightened awhile of his thoughts, forgetful of sin and judgment, a votary for once of the old god Pan ; and she fleeting lightly in her alluring pride of dispiteous youth, grassy robed, gold-tressed, between the white poplar stems.

And here, may be, standing on the bank of the river beside which Love had ever been strong upon him, and watching the waters flow he bethought him in the midst of his torment of that other Lady of his deepest desire, more cruel to him than any, and breathed upon the stream a message to her of this new love, whose chain was so strong that even if her grace were granted to him it would be in vain.

"O montanina mia canzon, tu vai ;
forse vedrai Fiorenza la mia terra . . ."

And now after all these centuries one seems still to hear in that deep murmur beneath the ripple of the water the voices of Poet and Lady, grown grave and sweet with time, mingled for ever in a questioning that expects no answer and a rebuke that knows no unkindness. All is as it was then. The stony bed of the river makes a wide white strand through which the narrow current hurries, and again spreads out in broad tranquil pools in which the poplars mirror themselves. Everything here is delicate, pale and fine—herbage, water, stems of trees, and trembling leaves. But now

the place is solitary. A little girl herding a few sheep wanders alone. Falterona rises up behind, clothed in storm-clouds, which shroud the cradle of the river of memories. There, to the left, stand up the towers of Romena. But they are shrunk to a bare anatomy. The poplars too are yellow this autumn evening; low clouds cover the sky "and no bird sings."

But other thoughts deeper than those of love, graver than those of worldly politics, possessed the poet's mind also in the Casentino. Though the *Divina Commedia* was probably not yet begun, the intention of it had been in him ever since he closed the story of his young life and its love for Beatrice with the promise to write concerning her that which had not before been written of any woman. As he trod the Valley in the idleness which is big with the deeds of the morrow, the great work to be was doubtless taking form and substance in his brain, and a thousand impressions from the world in which he moved must have mingled in the process. The images of the mountains form the framework and architecture of the scenes of Hell and Purgatory, and the poet's painful progress up the cliffs and steeps has in it the remembered anguish of many an arduous climb in the Apennines. "Dante," says Ampère, "actually walks with Virgil. He toils upward, he stops to take breath, he helps himself with his hand when his foot is not enough. He loses himself and asks his way. He

observes the altitude of the sun and of the stars. In a word, one finds the habits and the souvenirs of the traveller in every verse or rather in every step of his poetic peregrination."[1] He recalls the mists in which he has been caught in the Alps, and the sun feebly appearing through them as they begin to thin, when he is emerging out of the fog of the third circle of Purgatory into the sunlight again. And that dawn, when in the rose of the eastern sky the newly risen sun appeared tempered by the mists, so that the eye long endured it, of which he is reminded by the vision of the veiled Beatrice within a cloud of flowers, was surely a morning in the mountains. Again, one can hardly doubt that some thought of the yawning rocks of La Verna and of the Franciscan legend that they were shattered at the moment of the Crucifixion is in the description of the fallen cliff in the *Inferno* (C. xxi., vv. 106-114), where the way had been broken *a thousand two hundred and sixty-six years* before that Good Friday, 1300, of the poet's journey.

And those images drawn from the sweet pastoral scenes of earth, with which he refreshes himself now and again as he descends through the gloom of the godless region or climbs the painful hill of Purgatory, might well be memories of the Casentino; the sheep issuing from the fold and standing all timid, casting eye and nose to earth and huddling behind their leader, guileless and quick; the shepherd passing the

[1] *Voyage Dantesque*

night silently beside his flock, watching that no beast may scatter it; the goats wanton and agile on the hills or grown tame as they ruminate silent in the shade when the sun is hot, while the herd minds them, leaning on his staff (*Purgatorio*, C. xxvii.). There is a passage in the *Inferno* (C. xxiv., vv. 1-15) where the horror of the devilish depths of Malebolge is relieved by an enchanting glimpse of the life of the fields :—

"In that part of the youthful year wherein
the Sun his locks beneath Aquarius tempers,
and now the nights draw near to half the day,
what time the hoar-frost copies on the ground
the outward semblance of her sister white,
but little lasts the temper of her pen,
the husbandman, whose forage faileth him,
rises and looks, and seeth the champaign
all gleaming white, whereat he beats his flank,
returns in doors, and up and down laments,
like a poor wretch, who knows not what to do.
Then he returns, and hope revives again,
seeing the world has changed its countenance
in little time, and takes his shepherd's crook,
and forth the little lambs to pasture drives."[1]

These things may be seen to-day as then. Long familiarity with the ways of the weather still fails to teach the Italian peasant patience, and the customs of field and hill have not changed. At every turn almost one is reminded of some word of the divine poet's. I remember last autumn being shut out from an accustomed path through a vineyard because *l'uom*

[1] Longfellow's translation.

della villa had hedged up the opening *with a little forkful of his thorns* exactly as his ancestor in Dante's day was wont to do when the grape was darkening (*Purgatorio*, C. iv., vv. 19-21).

He for whom all things were *doubled one against the other*, and who looked upon the face of Nature as but the semblance of the unseen reality, saw, we cannot doubt, in every aspect of sky and earth, some similitude of the deeper existences of the moral and spiritual worlds, some adumbration of his visionary kingdoms of sin and sorrow and beatitude. Did not the pointed hill of Romena, that stands out in the midst of the Valley, circled seven times and more with calcined terraces, seem at times when *immaginativa* rapt him from the outer world the figure of the toil-some Mount of Repentance, up which it behoved him to struggle. And on clear nights, as he stood on its summit, whence the heavens unrolled themselves before him, did not the eternal circling of the spheres become visible in the order of the degrees of the blessed, within the all-comprehending Heaven of infinite Love, where motion and rest are one?

Often looking down at sunset into the western valley which opens behind Romena, where the stream's sanguine streak pierces its way into the gloom of the mountains, beneath the awful gold of the sky, he thought perhaps of the river of sin, whereon the deathly boatman conducts the lost souls to their eternal prison.

Dante in the Valley

And lifting his eyes, borne upwards in spirit on the thought of the glorious lady of his mind, did he not see, painted in the thrilling of crimsoned cloudlets around the intolerable brightness of the sky when the sun was just withdrawn, the mystic Garden of the Rose, the hosts of the seraphim, the throng of splendours still contemplating the radiance which his weak sight might not endure; and surely as he gazed he knew the time to come, when by painful steps and circling ways, casting off the burden of pride which bowed him to the earth, his soul too should rise thither at last where it should abide the vision of the ineffable Light, and in unceasing contemplation know eternal peace.



SERRAVALLE

CHAPTER IX

CAMALDOLI—BADIA A PRATAGLIA—VALLOMBROSA

"... the peaceful hermitage,
the hairy gown, and mossy cell."

THE nature of saints and mystics is to climb. It is as if their feet must follow the soul and give bodily expression to the spiritual aspiration. They cannot rest till they have arrived, breathless and bleeding, at the extremest peak within reach of their soaring eyes, and when at last the flesh can go no further, who can measure the spirit's spring beyond?

The naked crags of the Casentino are hallowed by the footsteps of many a holy hermit. Long before Francesco d'Assisi came to La Verna, San Romualdo had scaled the heights of the Giogana in search of a

place lofty and remote enough for the contemplative life, and had founded near the source of the Archiano the hermitage and monastery of Camaldoli, from which the whole order of his followers took its name.

Romualdo was of the great Ravennese family of the Onesti, and a kinsman of the Contessa Engelrada, who married the first of the Conti Guidi known to history. In his youth he lived like other young nobles, fighting, feasting and hunting. But he was different to his fellows, and much given to thought. Often when following the stag in the great pine forests of Ravenna he would forget his quarry and fall into deep meditation upon the realities which are behind the appearances of life. Legend tells how one day, as he wandered thus, he suddenly came upon his father in the act of treacherously slaying a foe whom he had beguiled to the place with fair words. The youth was so filled with horror and shame that he determined to betake himself to a monastery and do penance for this crime. His father, a fierce and ambitious baron, laughed and raged by turns at him, and when he persisted in his intention, locked him up in a deep dungeon. But iron bars were not to deter Romualdo from fulfilling his purpose. He managed to escape, and went to the monastery of St. Appollinare in Classe, where, after watching through a whole night in the church, and suffering the mysterious agony by which great souls apprehend their destiny, he took the vows of a Benedictine monk.

But soon his uncompromising zeal made him hated by his fellow monks, who were lax and easy-going, and to save his life from their machinations he had to fly from the convent. He then joined a hermit who lived in a forest, and under the severe discipline of this holy man he lived a life of the most rigid austerity. Before long he acquired the fame of extreme sanctity, and many serious and devout men began to follow him. His burning enthusiasm for holiness and the energy of his will made him a great power, and he went about from place to place reforming the lax and corrupt religious communities to a new life of devotion and discipline. Many a time his life was sought by monks who preferred their old ways of ease and sinfulness, but their wicked plots were invariably confounded by signal miracles. Romualdo also founded many hermitages. One day in a vision he saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, like that of Jacob's dream, and upon it men in white raiment ascending and descending, whom he saw to be his own followers. When he awoke, he commanded that the communities which he had established should change the black habit of the Benedictines for a white one; and from that time to this the Camaldolesi have worn the white habit.

Romualdo, if the chronicles tell true, had reached the patriarchal age of a hundred and twenty at his death in 1027. The Eremo of Camaldoli was not founded till 1012, when, according to the reckoning of his biographers, he must have been over a hundred. The summit of

the Giogana may well have been his last and steepest pilgrimage. A certain Count Maldolo, a noble of Arezzo, is said to have given the land for the new convent, and from him the name is supposed to be derived—*Casa Malduli*, or *Camaldoli*. The holy man and his followers had not long set their nests in the crags before the fame of their sanctity drew up after them a great host of pilgrims. For those whose flesh had not been disciplined to the privations which the hermits courted, San Romualdo set up a hospice below the Eremo, at about a mile's distance, beside a fountain of very excellent water, whence the house was first called l'Ospizio di Fonte-buona. Before long, so great was the concourse of monks to the community, the hospice was enlarged and partly converted into a monastery, though it continued to be also a house for guests, in which character it became famous later on.

San Romualdo did not, like San Francesco, forbid his monks to accept worldly possessions. The community of Camaldoli daily increased in wealth and power from the benefactions of the surrounding nobles, especially of the Conti Guidi, and its Abbot, who was often called Count, grew to be a great feudal lord. Many rich abbeys and monasteries of the Casentino became subject to it, as well as numerous castles—Soci, Partina, Serravalle and others. These domains involved the monks in all those distracting cares and worldly disputes from which San Francesco later defended his followers by the vow of poverty. The

Camaldolesi appear in the mediæval records in continual conflict with the Guidi and their other secular neighbours, who alternated between persecution and beneficence in dealing with them. The famous Count Guidoguerra, as we have seen, was a great offender against their peace and piety. They had often to endure mockery and despoliation, but with the Pope and his terrible ban at hand to help them, they usually got the best of their enemies in the end, and while the great barons declined gradually into insignificance, and finally vanished from the scene, the community, continually enriched by new gifts from princes and potentates, flourished and grew to even greater importance, till in the sixteenth century it is said to have possessed no less than eighty-four fiefs.

It did not, however, altogether escape the misfortunes of war. The Venetians under d'Alviano in 1498 laid waste all the monastic lands, and besieged the convent itself, but they were driven off by the energetic Abate Basilio, a monk valiant in war, and devoted and faithful to his country. Basilio, having donned the corselet over his religious habit, was not content with freeing the monastery, but sallying forth set himself at the head of the Florentine soldiers and fell upon the enemy suddenly on various occasions in other parts of the Valley, stripping them of their baggage, and helping greatly to discomfit them.

Though earthly interests intruded themselves into this lofty retreat of religion, the ideal of San Romualdo,

whom St. Benedict names to Dante, in the exalted sphere of the contemplatives, among

> ". . . li frati miei, che dentro ai chiostri
> fermar li piedi, e tennero il cor saldo,"

was still maintained in the Eremo, where the hermits, each in his solitary cell apart, passed their days in abstinence and contemplation. And in the great convent below the monks dignified their less austere lives by patient cultivation of their domain, and especially by a prudent and far-sighted care of their noble forests, tending, planting and preserving, so that to this day, when the work is continued by the Government, the hills around Camaldoli are clothed with thick groves, while the Apennines generally have suffered denudation. They kept alive in their rocky fastness the virtues and gentleness of civilisation, driven out from the bloody fields below; they cultivated hospitality and courtesy, and the convent became a sanctuary of good manners and refinement. Popes and princes visited it continually and were sumptuously entertained.

Above all, the community cherished knowledge and letters, not excluding philosophy from their contemplation of divine things. The convent became a centre of intellectual life and a home of scholars. When with time learning began to venture forth from the cloister and to throw off the bonds of mediæval thought it did not abandon the high ridges of Camaldoli, but returning there, brought with it the enthusiasm of the fifteenth

century for antiquity. The famous Greek scholar, Ambrogio Traversari, reigned as General of the order for many years and collected a fine library, which has now been dispersed; he was succeeded by his pupil, Mariotti, who during his priorate entertained in the cool shadow of the pine forest, at the season when the sultry heat made the city intolerable, that elect circle of scholars and thinkers which the Medici had gathered round them in Florence. The Medici showed special favour towards Camaldoli; Lorenzo sent his son Giovanni, the future Pope Leo X., on frequent visits there to profit by the instructions and example of Pietro Delfino, who succeeded Mariotti, and in after years Leo conferred many favours on the monastery in gratitude for the benefits he had received there.

The road to Camaldoli from the valley turns off near Poppi and soon begins to mount, sweeping upwards for many a mile in great bends, like the path of an ascending eagle, now hanging upon a narrow shelf, with the precipice falling away below, now winding round to the other side of the ridge and disclosing with each turn a glorious view of mountain and valley. On the left one looks down into a wide sterile valley where sheep and goats wander, seeking out the scarce blades and leaves. Moggiona is seen far off in it, clustered among the rocks, and farther down, towards the opening into the main Valley, stands Lierna, strangest of human dwelling-places, built along the top of a thin wall of rock, which falls almost sheer on either side. Beyond

Lierna rises the tiny village of Avena, which was once a castle of the Guidi, and called Ragginopoli. To the right you look over Soci and away to Bibbiena lying across the opening of the Valley.

After a long climb, the road enters into the solitary forest. Presently before you, in a hollow of the hills, which rise up on all sides, dark with forests, appears a great building, with the stately and picturesque aspect of a Renaissance villa, hanging upon the edge of the narrow gorge of a torrent. Delicious green slopes scattered with spreading oak trees rise and fall in front of it, moistened and refreshed by the spray of the stream. In spring you seem to have wandered into the earthly paradise, for the slopes are then thickly strewn with rare coloured flowers. Great patches of forget-me-not, blue as the sky above them, mingled with the pink of ragged robin and orchis, and all sorts of tiny lilac and white and blue flowers, masses of buttercups, daisies and pansies, and rising above the lesser flowers, stately white asphodel. Such as this must have been that lawn of Dante's dream, where Leah wanders, plying her fair hands to make her a garland.

The monastery was suppressed in 1866, but its old traditions of hospitality are still kept up, for it is now a great hotel, and is much frequented in the summer. But visitors are no longer received by a stately abbot and a picturesque company of white-robed monks, and lighter diversions have taken the place of platonic discussions, and the poetic charm has vanished with



THE OLD CONVENT (NOW HOTEL) AT CAMALDOLI.

the old order of things. The interior of the convent has been greatly altered, but there is still a fine fifteenth century hall with an ornate wooden ceiling, known as the Sala delle Academie, in memory of the famous Medicean discussions. There are some beautiful Renaissance chairs in it and a tapestried settee with the name of the General, Mariottus, and the emblem of the community, two doves drinking from a chalice, embroidered on the back. This charming device is also carved in the spacious corridors.

A few monks still inhabit a part of the building, which opens off a fine old cloister, of simple and impressive style, and said to be of great antiquity, part of a castle or villa here belonging to Count Maldalo in the tenth century. In the midst stands a picturesque fountain. The church is an eighteenth century restoration, ornamented in the style of that period, and contains some paintings by Vasari. An interesting survival of the sixteenth century is the old pharmacy, where special balsams and aromatic liquids are decocted from the pine trees and from the simples of the woods.

Sacrilegious change has fortunately not disturbed the hermits in their high nest above. The path up to the Sacro Eremo follows the gorge of the ever-narrowing stream through the green pavilioned coolness and silence of the forest. Here, between the soaring shafts of the pine trees, one often chances to encounter a procession of the white-robed contemplatives, wearing their large quaint hats, and for the moment the past is

completely restored to one. A forest is the natural home of an anchorite; here is the stillness, the solitude which his being needs; here are streams to drink from and berries for food. Half way up stands a little shrine, on a spot where San Romualdo had a victorious encounter with the devil, and further on you come upon three great crosses of wood, signs that the wilderness has been consecrated to Christ. After a time the solemn pine trees which have accompanied the climber all the way cease, and you come out in a sort of clearing, whence you look back upon the dark roof and aisles of the forest, with their smooth gigantic columns stretching away into the shadowy depths. And here are flowers again—flowers everywhere. Acacia and gorgeous yellow broom; beneath the feet anemones and orchis, white, pink and yellow, with Solomon's seal and columbines. Earlier the ground is all primroses, and later on wild strawberries spot with crimson the sweet thymy carpet, and luscious raspberries drop from the tangled undergrowth.

In the midst of this fragrant wilderness, in a sort of enchanted circle of civilisation and industry, stands the great hermit settlement. All round is going on the busy work of the woodcutters, reminding one of the industrial side of these old monastic establishments, which carried on the useful labours of cultivation in the days of wasteful war, and ennobled them by a religious consecration. Within the fine gateway is a court surrounded by buildings connected with the

hermitage ; the church, with an ornate late Renaissance façade and two towers, stands on the right. Beyond, guarded by a tall wooden cross, is an inner enclosure,



SACRO EREMO

into which no woman may pass. Here, on either side of a long paved path bordered with neat grass plats, stand the little low-gabled dwellings of the hermits, each with its little cultivated plot enclosed within a stone wall. The place has the calm and peaceful look of some hospital for the aged in England. But how

different the setting here, the wild mountains, the forest roaring all round in autumn with the unbroken rush of the winds over the Apennine ridges? Behind and on either side of the little colony rises a close dark wall of pine woods, planted doubtless for the sake of protection, so that each recluse may meditate undisturbed with his lamp beside him in the obscurity of the long evenings, himself as it were a quenchless torch kindled at the light of that changeless Heaven which is beyond the turmoil of our spheres.

Some of the cells are the original ones built by San Romualdo. The first on the right stands on the spot of his vision of the heavenly ladder, beside a cold spring from which he drank. Another, decorated with the "Palle" of the Medici, is of much later origin and recalls the audacious freak of a princess of that House who, attired as a man, violated the *clausura* of the hermits and penetrated within the sacred enclosure. She was ordered by the Pope to build a cell as a penance.

The cell inhabited by the holy founder himself is outside the barrier and is kept untenanted. It was offered to San Francesco, when he visited the hermitage, as his lodging, but he refused on the ground of unworthiness. We were assured that it resembles all the others in every way. Beyond a minute vestibule, there is a little living chamber, with an aperture in the wall, barred on the outside, through which the inmate's daily supply of food is put in. It has a large hearth, and a recess for sleeping. San Romualdo's bed is spread with a

matting only, but the hermits now enjoy the luxury of straw mattresses. A tiny oratory and study completes the dwelling. In such an abode each hermit lives a solitary life, occupied in prayer, meditation and study, issuing forth only at stated times to assist in the offices in the choir of the church, and to walk out three times a week in the forest. Every night at one o'clock they come out of their cells and gather in the church for Matins, summer and winter alike. When the snow is thick a path is cleared by means of oxen, and the monks pass in procession between two high white walls, each carrying a little lantern. Theirs is a life of primitive innocence and simplicity. They eat no animal food, nor do they work with their hands, except to cultivate their little gardens, but give themselves altogether to spiritual exercise.

To labourers in material fields, with sweaty brows, this existence seems but idleness and waste; they repeat the old utilitarian objection, *this ointment might have been sold for much and given to the poor*, forgetful that it was answered long ago, *she hath wrought a good work upon me.* These Camaldolese hermits have a sweetness and gentleness of expression which seems to justify their way of life; gathered within the green subdued light of the forest, behind the great Cross, they stand apart from the cares and passions of men,

> "Pluckers of amaranth grown beneath God's eye
> In gracious twilights where His chosen lie."

There is a strange contrast between the simple anchorites and the temple in which they worship. The interior of the Chiesa Maggiore is baroque in the most exaggerated sense of the word; incredibly ornate, plastered all over with gilt, and with choreographic nymphs figuring as angels. Nowhere is the extraordinary paradox of the Roman Church, which loads its worship of the Babe of Nazareth with all the pomp of the world and decks out humility in trappings of gold and jewels, so apparent as here in this gaudy fane set on a mountain top of the Apennines in the heart of the solitary forest. The church contains no artistic treasures of any kind, but in the little chapel of Sant Antonio, on the other side of the court, there is a terra-cotta altar-piece by Giovanni della Robbia, a Madonna and Child, with SS. Sebastian, Antony, Romualdo and the Magdalen, an uninteresting work, resembling a good deal his Madonna del Rifugio at La Verna. San Romualdo in altercation with two demons is represented in the predella, which bears the device of the community, together with two dolphins, the arms of Pietro Delfino, general of the order in the latter part of the fifteenth century.

Saints and Popes and Emperors have climbed up in past times to this hermitage. Francesco d'Assisi came to press the footprints of the holy Romualdo with his own bare eager feet. Dante had doubtless seen the source of the Archiano, *che sopra l'Ermo*

nasce in Apennino.[1] But few of the pilgrims surpass in interest for us a little company that assembled here in the summer of 1468. There were the two princely youths, Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici, the one destined to rule Florence in the hour of her beauty and magnificence, the other to be the sacrifice at the assassin's hand for the over-great glory and sin of his House. They were attended by several Florentines of learning and distinction, and at the Eremo, Cristoforo Landino, who had come up with his brother from his villa at Borgo alla Collina, joined them. It is to Landino's *Camaldolese Disputes*, a book famous in its time, that we owe the story of this meeting, with its picturesque details. An interchange of stately greetings between Lorenzo and his old tutor was interrupted by the announcement of the unexpected arrival of Marsilio Ficino and Leone Battista Alberti, the two most remarkable men of the Medicean circle, the frail, delicate Marsilio being *facile princeps* among the Platonists of his time, while Leone Battista was a marvel of physical and intellectual strength, a man whose charm and marked personality made him the natural leader of any society in which he found himself. The two being in company together had

[1] The torrent which comes down from the Eremo, past the monastery below, is not the Archiano, but the Fosso di Camaldoli, which falls into the Archiano lower down, just below Serravalle. Whether Dante confused the two streams, or whether the Archiano proper also rises above the Eremo, I do not know.

decided to turn aside from the road to Florence, whither they had intended to go, and to seek during the dog days the cool shades of the Casentino. They were received with enthusiasm by the first comers, and the next day, when all were well rested, the whole party having assisted at Mass, were pleased, "for the sake of health and enjoyment," to walk up through the high forest, which extended to the mountain top. When by slow degrees they were at last come to the top, they found a flowery glade beside a clear spring, over which a great beech tree spread its shade. Here they sat down to rest, at the suggestion of Leone Battista, to whom the tree with its soft murmur and the rushing stream brought Socratic memories, and drew him at once into philosophic discourse. In accordance with the spirit of the place, he dwelt on the advantages of the contemplative life, a subject agreeable likewise to the platonic sentiment of the party. In response the nineteen-year-old Lorenzo, already a statesman and on the eve of succession to the highest position in the Florentine Republic, pleaded in favour of active intercourse with the world of men. This discussion and others on the following days, all showing the prevailing influence of platonic ideas, are described by Landino, and though no doubt he invented them mostly himself, they probably give a very true picture of the thoughts and interests of that singularly gifted circle. Strange the combination of keen delight in lofty spiritual and intellectual ideas

with vice, craft and cruelty in some of these representative men of the age. In this young Lorenzo, seated in the chosen place of the ascetic visionary Romualdo, eagerly drinking of the fountain of mystic philosophy, we see the same man who corrupted the noble sobriety of Florence to luxury and immorality, and crushed her freedom under his feet.

Another Florentine, visiting Camaldoli in the next century, was affected in the same way as Alberti and his friends by the contemplative spirit of the place. Vasari, whom the monks summoned to decorate their church with those bombastic paintings which were so much more highly prized in his day than now, records that when he arrived there : *I was greatly pleased with the Alpine and eternal solitude and quiet of that holy place . . . those fathers, of venerable aspect . . . I experienced how much more profitable to study is sweet quiet and virtuous solitude than the clamour of the piazza and the court.*

A beautiful walk along the mountain side, beneath tall beech trees, leads from the hermitage to the ancient abbey, Badia a Prataglia, which is situated a few miles to the south-east of Camaldoli in the valley of the Archiano. Badia a Prataglia is of older origin than the more famous Eremo. Its monks had already claimed the mountain solitudes for the Church and for civilisation by the year 1002, when they are mentioned in a diploma of Otto III.'s. A few years later the

monastery was enlarged and richly endowed by the Bishops of Arezzo and given to the Benedictines. The Guidi and other barons of the neighbourhood bestowed territories upon it. But as soon as San Romualdo's community was founded, jealousies and quarrels arose between the two convents, and the Badia gradually declined as its rival increased in fame and power, and in the twelfth century Adrian IV., to put an end to the constant disputes, made it subject to Camaldoli. In 1391 it was finally suppressed. The old church still exists in the little mountain village, which has now become a favourite summer resort. It may be reached from the main Valley by a splendid road which has been made of late years from the Casentino into the Romagna. This passes first through Soci, an ancient fortified place which belonged originally to the Guidi, and suffered much in the contests with the Ubertini and the Tarlati, and which now, by setting the wild waters of the Archiano to turn machinery, has transformed itself into a little modern manufacturing town. The road follows on along the right bank of the river past La Mausolea, an old villa belonging to the monks of Camaldoli, where Piero de' Medici was near being surprised and captured by the Florentines in 1498, when in exile with a price of 4000 florins upon his head. He was in the company of d'Alviano and the Venetians who had occupied Bibbiena, and for who knows what private game of his own he had arranged to lodge on a certain night in this villa with only a few

followers. The Ten (Dieci di Balia) of Florence, having somehow learnt his intention, sent word to their captains in the Valley to surround the house and take him. But he was warned in time, and when the Florentines arrived they had only the poor satisfaction of burning the empty palace. Ariosto, in one of his Satires, enumerating all the claimants for favours from the Medicean Pope, Leo X., represents one as saying: "I was with Piero in Casentino." To have attended that rash young prince, whom his father called the fool of the family, in such perilous circumstances might well constitute a right to reward in after days from his successful brother.

A little pile of buildings, clustered most picturesquely with a group of dark trees against the mountain side, stands up on the left. It represents the old Castle of Partina, which belonged to the monks of Camaldoli, and afterwards to the Counts of Romena. The hills now rise high on either side of the torrent, and a turn of the road discloses Serravalle, set far above upon the sharp ridge of a precipitous mountain, a white aerial little town, overtopped by the tower of a ruined castle. To one's right the old strongholds of Marciano and Gressa are seen seated upon crags detached from the great mountain wall. The road winds on and up, a veritable shelf cut in the rock, with the stream gushing far below at the foot of the steep oak woods. Rivulets descend on the left, spanned by bridges as they leap down narrow clefts, on their way to the Archiano below.

Presently Badia a Prataglia comes in sight, far ahead, and soon one reaches the village. It is not picturesque or interesting in itself, being principally a place for summer visitors,[1] but is set in the midst of the most enchanting woods and lawns and delicious streams, sheltered in the lap of the wild hills. The church has been entirely transformed at different times, and only the shell of the tenth century building is left. But the original crypt remains, though now used for the humble purpose of a wood cellar; it is a very interesting little building of Romanesque style, quite complete with tribune and three naves, though divided up by partitions of later date. The low vaulted roof is supported on stone columns, with sculptured capitals now almost worn away. Two of the capitals are of marble. The chief ornament of the church is a fine cinquecento frame over the altar, designed by Vasari for the high altar at Camaldoli and thence transported here. It has the Camaldolese emblem, the doves, upon the pillars.

A climb of about an hour from the village brings one to the crest of the mountain above. As one gets higher the country begins to have a volcanic look. Great walls of slate-like rock, sheer and naked, break the verdant hillsides. The road crosses the gorge and mounts up in long loops, and the great Apennine scene spreads out wider and wider before one. Beyond a welter of ridges southwards La Verna rises large and

[1] There is an English summer pension at Badia a Prataglia, Pension Bosco-Verde, which is very well spoken of.



A Mountain Girl.

shadowy, and to the west the dim distant forms of the Pratomagno range lift themselves above the intervening summits. The chestnut zone is soon left behind, and the road passes between stunted beechwood and rough waste ground, where flowers spring thick, and through dark pine woods; and turning one's back upon the Tuscan country, spread out green and smiling below, and walking eastwards for a space, one emerges, through a gap blasted in the rocks, into an utterly contrasting world. The strange dead region of the Alta Romagna lies spread out before one, heaped up in sharp cones and ridges of ashen rock, pallid, skeleton, sterile, without a trace of habitation or sign of bird or beast: only the road cutting sharply down and down, in endless curves, till far away a pale green plain is seen, with a stream winding through a sandy bed and losing itself between the distant hills of a serener and gentler world. It is the Savio, which lower down in its course bathes the flank of Cesena, the city which, *as it is seated between the plain and the mountain, so lives it between tyranny and freedom.*

In such a country as this, which seems changed by an ironic enchanter into a sterile gold that can feed no hunger and quench no thirst, one imagines those sandy streams must take their rise, which bring down and deposit in their pallid beds the ore for which men struggle and agonise, strangling one another in their rage to gain it.

Vallombrosa, which with La Verna and Camaldoli

forms the trio of famous religious sanctuaries of the Casentino, hardly falls within the scope of this book. Though included in the district of the Casentino, it lies quite outside the Valley, upon the western side of the Pratomagno, and is most easily reached by a little mountain railway from St. Ellero, the station next to Pontassieve, on the line between Florence and Arezzo. There is a road, however, which branches off from the high road of the Consuma and leads thither, and from the Casentino proper it may be reached by delightful tracks over the mountains, starting from the villages in the valleys on the east side of the Pratomagno. From Montemignaio it is a walk of about three hours to Vallombrosa. From Raggiolo it takes many hours longer, but the way, which after a long climb follows the crest of the mountain for some distance over solitary stretches of short grass, with glorious views of the Val d'Arno on the one hand and the Casentino on the other, and then descends through "Etrurian shades" till the monastery is reached, is an enchanting pilgrimage in fine weather.

The monastery of Vallombrosa was founded in 1060 by San Giovanni Gualberto, the young Florentine noble who spared the life of his brother's murderer when he had him in his power, and having received wonderful signs of the divine grace, abandoned the world and established a community of reformed Benedictines, known as the Vallombrosan monks. The land where he built his convent was granted to him

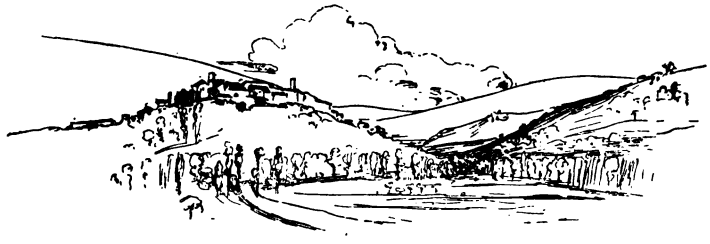
by the Countess Itta dei Guidi, a nun, and sister of the first Count Guidoguerra, who was himself also a generous patron of the new order. The community grew rapidly rich and powerful, and the great Abbey of San Fedele at Poppi, as well as many other houses in the Casentino, became subject to it. In modern times, however, it fell into decay, and in 1880 was suppressed. The great house is now a summer hotel and the care of the forest has passed into civil hands. The very name of Vallombrosa brings the thought of classic groves, suggested by the famous lines :—

> " Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks
> In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades,
> High over-arch'd embower."

But the dark, colourless patches of pines upon the mountain side, seen from far off, do not look as if they would fulfil the promise of the beautiful Miltonic words.



ARMS OF CARDINAL BIBBIENA



THE GATEWAY OF THE VALLEY

CHAPTER X

THE GATEWAY OF THE VALLEY

"L'Arno luce fra i pioppi"

BIBBIENA, stretched bow-like upon its hill, a white, graceful little town, rising out of dark groves of cypresses, and watered at its foot by intersecting streams, stands like a warder at the gateway of the Valley. The converging hills are pierced behind it by the narrow strait through which the river makes its way out, flowing towards Arezzo. It is true that the country for many miles further on, as far as Santa Mama, is still called the Casentino. But it is no longer the Valley Enclosed. The boundaries of the district have changed with the change of its political conditions, but geographically the wide basin of the river in its upper course is the Casentino proper, and so it is in a historic sense. Dante so limits it: "At the *foot* of the Casentino a stream crosses, which is named Archiano"; and the Archiano traverses the

plain beneath Bibbiena on the north, falling close by into Arno. This is the Casentino which the Conti Guidi ruled, which San Francesco overlooked from La Verna, which the Poet paced in his exile, and as such it is the Casentino of our thoughts.

Beyond the Archiano the hereditary domination of the Guidi ceased. Arezzo stretched her sway up from the south, and her prince bishops held the strong castle of Bibbiena as their appanage. As long as the Guidi supported the Ghibelline cause and were in close alliance with Arezzo, peace prevailed between Bibbiena and the strongholds higher up the river. Count Guido Novello and Bishop Guglielmino Ubertini took the field together at the fatal battle of Campaldino, as we have seen, and their respective castles shared the same fate at the hands of the victors, whose rage, however, fell first and heaviest upon Bibbiena. They occupied the town immediately after the battle and sacked it for eight days, destroying the walls and defences, and departing with an immense quantity of spoil.

But in the early part of the next century, when the Guelf Guidi da Battifolle were lords of Poppi and Bishop Guido de' Tarlati and his fierce race ruled in Bibbiena, which they built up again as strongly as before, there was bitter enmity between the two great strongholds. A war raged intermittently for many years, during which the Tarlati gained advantage over the Guidi and occupied many of their castles. The ambition of the intruders was, however, checked by



BIBBIENA.

Florence. In 1366 Pier Saccone, nephew of Bishop Guido, was compelled to cede Arezzo to the Republic, but obtained as compensation the free dominion of Bibbiena, which he and his son Marco succeeded in holding in spite of the stratagems by which Florence tried later to oust them, till in 1360, vexed by their siding with Milan against her, she sent a large army to attack them. Bibbiena now suffered a weary siege of two months, at the end of which the Tarlati were compelled to surrender and were carried away prisoners to Florence. The castle and town passed into the dominion of the Republic. In 1440, at the time of the Count of Poppi's rebellion, it was assaulted and taken by Niccolò Piccinino, but was recovered shortly after with the rest of the Casentino.

At the end of the fifteenth century Bibbiena was corrupted from its allegiance to Florence by partisans of the exiled Medici, led by the Dovizi, a family which had gained influence through the abilities of the celebrated Bernardo Dovizi, known to history as Cardinal Bibbiena. The place became a centre of Medicean intrigue, and in 1498 the Venetian captain, Bartolommeo d'Alviano, having entered into correspondence with the disloyal inhabitants, sent some of his soldiers secretly by night, and they entered the town without opposition, and being joined by the conspirators, seized the castle and made themselves masters of the place. D'Alviano followed and established his head quarters there, in the heart of the

Florentine territory. During his occupation some famous personages were gathered in Bibbiena; Piero and Giuliano de' Medici, exiled by the city which had bowed down before their father, the Magnificent; Duke Guidobaldo of Urbino, general of the Venetian forces and husband of that gracious hostess of *Cortigiano* fame, Elisabetta Gonzaga; Astorre Baglioni and other captains, who were driven in gradually from the mountain passes which they were holding, by the cautious but steady advance of the Florentines and by the hostility of the mountain folk. Practically besieged in Bibbiena by the Florentine general, Vitello, menaced with starvation in the midst of the rigours of an Alpine winter, the intruders suffered much hardship and sickness, but it was not till the following April that, in accordance with the terms of the peace concluded between Venice and Florence, they vacated the Valley, where, in Macchiavelli's words, they had *fatto il diavolo*.

As a punishment for her disloyalty, and to deprive her of the power of doing further harm, Bibbiena was now condemned by Florence to lose the honourable ornament of her ancient walls and towers. The men of Poppi helped to accomplish the work of destruction, and vented their neighbourly spite by sacking the town and heaping insults and indignities upon the unfortunate inhabitants. From this time the once proud seat of the Bishops of Arezzo, robbed of its strength, declined into insignificance in undisturbed peace. It has little now left of its mediæval aspect. The cypress-

shadowed gardens of Renaissance palaces wreath the slopes with roses where once the walls stood. The steep, narrow streets are, however, squalid and mediæval enough, and on the north side a picturesque old gateway remains, guarded by a broken tower. The campanile on the Piazza is also an ancient tower, one of the troop which once guarded the stronghold, or episcopal palace in which the warlike Guglielmino and the potent Bishop Guido de' Tarlati and the other holders of the pastoral staff held their court, did justice upon their vassals, and kept jealous guard over the Valley below.

They could not have had a more advantageous seat; nor could one who desires to-day to view all the glory of the Valley Enclosed choose a better place than this. Standing here at the gateway you look back upon the vast unbroken sweep of the mountains, walling the fair green basin of the river from all contact with the outer world. You see the silver stream winding in its pallid bed; upon it, in the centre of the scene, rises proud little Poppi, and, far away, Romena's meagre towers stand out from the western slopes, and the grim keep of Porciano is still more distantly descried, a brown spot upon the mountain side. And everywhere the slopes of the hills are spread with castled villages, and each rocky spur is embattled with some tower or frowning wall. Fronzola, on the west, hangs hawklike over beautiful Poppi. Uzzano, a perch for a bird's claw, guards with a ruined fortalice the entrance to the valley that opens on the left into the recesses of the Pratomagno, and

holds within its depths Ortignano, Raggiolo, and other villages of the feudal past. Soci lies far down in the plain, on the right, hiding the grim vestiges of mediæval times beneath a modern growth of factories and pleasant-looking white houses. Against the eastern hill Marciano and Gressa group themselves picturesquely round their shattered towers, within sheltering groves of oak, and Serravalle, far back in the gorge of the Archiano, peers from behind the shoulders of intervening hills. Wheeling round to the south-west, you see, lying blue and dreamlike, the folds of the converging hills between which the river winds out of the Valley; and following them back eastwards as they rise up again cloudlike against the sky, your eye rests upon the dark Rock of La Verna, hovering close above; then travelling onwards along the *gran giogo*, makes the great circuit once again.

From here I have watched the winter changes of the Apennines. A day of rain, of fog in the Valley, and thick mist upon the hills, and a day when the pall begins to thin and break, when black cloud lowers upon the mountain tops with ragged edges and loose grey shreds, shaping itself as the hours wear on, and letting the blue break through. Then at night a few sharp gusts, and in the morning a clear washed sky, unbroken azure from rim to rim, ascending in the vast sweep of its dome from a white radiance of light up to the glowing depth of the zenith and sinking again to the green of a celestial jewel. And upon that

heavenly bed rests the limpid curve of the mountains which all day long wear their summer evening robe, *men che di rose, più che di viole*, while every little building upon their slopes, with face set sunwards is a golden star. As the day declines the russet woods glimmer upon the shadowy western slopes, and beneath the descending rays the deep clefts fill with sunlit mist, while the lofty fields of snow above are ineffably white against the sun-paled azure of the sky. In the stillness of the afternoon the smoke goes up from a hundred fires upon the hills where the charcoal burners have set their heaps. But a day or two later, and the north wind has piled up the clouds in the welkin and a morning comes when the Valley lies under a snowy pall, still and dead beneath the iron sky, towers and castles shrunk to black scattered hovels, meaningless characters scrawled in ink upon a sheet of white.

The Church of Sant Ippolito stands on the Piazza. It is a "Propositura," and represents the ancient Pieve, now vanished and its site occupied by a farm-house among the vineyards on the north-west side of the hill. The present church is built above a great wall, in which are windows and arches of Romanesque form, now filled up, belonging to a church of earlier date once existing beneath. There is little of interest within the actual building, except a beautiful fifteenth century altar-piece.

This picture, which is attributed by Mr Berenson to Bicci di Lorenzo, and bears the date 1432, is a

Madonna and Child, with St. Ippolito, the patron of the church, and St. John the Baptist on her left, and SS. James and Christopher on her right, and there are quaint predella scenes, showing the executions of the various saints represented above. The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian occupies the place beneath St. Christopher, and the artist, with ingenuous faith, has represented the arrows rebounding from the saint's body and destroying his executioners. The great charm of this altar-piece is its completeness, with its fine decorative frame, which has graceful little figures of saints up the sides and small scenes in the quatrefoils above.

The church of the Franciscans, San Lorenzo, in Via Dovizi, contains two fine terra-cotta altar-pieces by Giovanni della Robbia, which bear the arms of Cardinal Bibbiena and are supposed to have been presented by him. The Nativity is one of the best and most characteristic examples of the artist. In both works the figures are broad and heavy and quite without spiritual feeling. The dead Christ in the Deposition is conventional and uninspired, but the women have a stately grace; they are earthly beauties with long waving hair. In the Nativity the Madonna has all that air of a grand lady with which the art of the cinquecento loved to portray her. The other figures have much vivacity, and the realistic landscape is very well treated. In the predella beneath there is a finely modelled St. Sebastian with the form of a young Antinous, and a scene of Christ and the Magdalen in

the Garden, in which He has the semblance of a pagan hero, and she, in her somewhat affected attitude, looks like some fine lady of the artist's day. The colour in this altar-piece, which is polychromatic, is of wonderfully decorative effect. The Pietà is chiefly white upon blue. Both are enframed in the characteristic double border of cherubs, and flowers and fruits. In the choir of this same church there is an exceptionally beautiful music book of the fifteenth century, with exquisite miniatures, somewhat archaic in character for the period. Among them is a picture of St. Francis receiving the Stigmata.

Some imposing palaces, their portals ornamented with sculptured shields, line the narrow streets of the town. The most interesting and picturesque is the Dovizi palace, a Renaissance building with Pointed windows and a noble arched entrance, over which is set the family shield, dignified with the Cardinal's hat. This was once the residence of Bibbiena's most famous son, Bernardo Dovizi, by whom the little town, in Ariosto's flattering words, is set on a par with Florence and Siena.

"Nota per costui Bibbiena
Quanto Firenza sua vicina e Siena."

The Dovizi were quite an obscure family, and the successful career of Bernardo, who is best known as Cardinal Bibbiena, is an instance of the power of personality in the Italy of the Renaissance. He was

early thrown in with the Medici and became the chosen companion of young Giovanni, afterwards Leo X. His good looks, elegant scholarship and charm of manner soon won him a distinguished place in the Medicean circle, while his abilities were of great service to the future Pope. Bibbiena, whose thin, subtle, melancholy face, with its suggestion of a fine humour, is familiar to us in Raphael's well-known portrait of him, was a typical churchman of his day; a fine and unscrupulous diplomat, the tool of the Medici, and the chief instrument in setting upon the throne of St. Peter the man who welcomed his election with the words, "Since God has given us the Papacy, let us enjoy it." His talent for devising pleasures and diversions was put at the service of the Pope in carrying out this resolve. He was the author of a comedy remarkable for licentiousness, and at the same time a lover of all beautiful things, friend of the finest spirits of the day, patron of Raphael, and one of that elect company, portrayed by Castiglione, who determine the qualifications of the ideal courtier in the apartments of the Duchess Elizabetta at Urbino, where, as a recognised wit, he is required to define the place of mirth and humour in the equipment of the man of perfect manners. Bibbiena lost the favour of the Pope in later years owing, it is thought, to intrigues for his own election in the event of Leo's death. If he entertained any such ambition it was frustrated by his own sudden death in 1520 a few months before his patron's.

Another celebrity of Bibbienese family, though not actually born in the town, was Francesco Berni, who was the father of Italian burlesque verse, which is called after him *poesia bernesca*. Berni, who was born of poor parents, was related to the Dovizi and went to Rome in the service of the Cardinal Bernardo, whose nephew, also a Cardinal, he served later. The poet, a lazy, whimsical fellow, was not energetic enough to please his patrons, but he delighted the rest of the world with his wit and drolleries. His death has been attributed to poison, the story being that he was asked by one of the two Medici cousins, Cardinal Ippolito or Duke Alessandro, the story does not say which, to poison the other, and on refusing was himself poisoned in revenge.

Bibbiena is a very convenient centre from which to explore the Valley. Poppi and the towns higher up are easily reached by road or rail. La Verna is not more than seven or eight miles away, and the famous sanctuary of Sta. Maria del Sasso is within a mile. At the foot of the rocky oak-strewn hill on which the town stands, spread pleasant fields, through which the Arno, the Archiano and the Teggina wander between silver groves of poplars and willows, nor is that storied strand far to seek, where the body of Buonconte rested with arms crossed upon the breast, till the rage of the devil, robbed of his soul, unloosed the waters to work their will upon the empty mansion of the man.

Sta. Maria del Sasso, a very holy sanctuary of the

Dominicans, stands a little to the north of the town, in a deep hollow beside the torrent of the Vessa. Above it rises the high hill which La Verna crowns, whence the convent of San Francesco looks down upon this low rock dwelling of the followers of his fellow saint Domenico. Just beyond the church the country breaks into wild pastures and woods strewn with huge boulders, and the Lady of the Sasso herself rises among great scattered rocks. Nearly six hundred years ago, just before the outbreak of the great plague, when the world seemed full of dreadful portents and an undefined terror hung over men's minds; when cruel deeds and bloodshed and a kind of reckless passion bred out of hopelessness prevailed throughout the world, and especially in the Casentino, where among the dark hills and precipices the general gloom seemed to brood more heavily, a white dove was seen to alight day after day upon a rough boulder on this spot. A poor hermit who had made his hut hard by was the first to observe it, and presently the report of it spread abroad and people flocked from Bibbiena and all the parts around to salute this miraculous harbinger, as they took it to be, of a new peace and gentleness upon the suffering earth. Before long the dove became in their imagination no other than the Virgin herself, and many avowed that they had actually seen her in her own bodily form. Then the men of Bibbiena caused an image of her to be painted, holding her son in her arms, and they built a little church here, aided by alms



SANTA MARIA DEL SASSO.

from the world beyond, where the marvellous story was told far and wide. Soon a little hospice was added to shelter the numerous pilgrims that visited the sanctuary.

In 1468 the Dominicans of San Marco in Florence were installed here, and the old church being burnt down in 1486, they built the present one, being helped, we are told, by generous gifts from Lorenzo de' Medici and by money bestowed in response to the exhortations of Savonarola, then Prior of San Marco. The church is a Renaissance building of noble simplicity of form, with a cupola in the midst, beneath which stands a beautiful tabernacle of the same period and style, decorated with a Robbia frieze of doves and cherubim alternating. Upon the altar within the tabernacle is the old Giottesque picture of the Madonna painted for the men of Bibbiena, and behind is the very rock upon which the miraculous dove appeared. The church contains many paintings of the sixteenth century and later, among them a great Assumption, in the choir, designed by Fra Bartolommeo and painted by his pupil, Fra Paolino di Pistoia. There is also in the nave a very florid polychromatic relief of the Della Robbia school representing Christ and John the Baptist. In the crypt is a famous image of the Virgin, called the Madonna *del Buio* (of the dark), sculptured in wood, which is said to work miracles. The many wonders performed by it are depicted in the vestibule, with inscriptions relating the facts. The

present image is a careful copy of the original sixteenth century figure, which was accidentally burnt quite recently. The round west window of the church is filled with beautiful fifteenth century glass, remarkable for rich colour and fine design. The choir stalls are very beautiful carved and inlaid work of the same period.

An additional beauty and devoutness is given to this gracious little sanctuary by the white-robed forms of the brothers moving about within it. The office of Vespers is a particularly impressive ceremony. Following two schoolboy novices, who wear garments of purest white and carry lighted candles, the friars emerge in procession from the choir, behind the high altar, into the obscurity of the nave. Having prostrated themselves before the altar, they proceed to chant the office, led by the young high voices of the boys, who kneel with their candles on the steps of the tabernacle. One of the number sprinkles the rest with holy water and they all embrace one another solemnly, and when the service is finished they rise from their knees, bow low to the ground, and pass away in the wake of the novices, as they came. In the beautiful cloisters also these appropriate figures, both those of the friars and those of the young novices whom they are educating, give significance to the noble curves and lines of the architecture, which is of the same pure Early Renaissance period as the church. It is decorated with late and bad frescoes, so decayed, however,



Boy Novices. Santa Maria del Sasso.

as to be scarcely distinguishable, and making a pleasant purplish warmth upon the plaster within the general white and grey of the colour. In the midst of the enclosure stands a picturesque stone well, around which the brothers cultivate little garden plots.

The note of the convent is its quiet and peacefulness. Outside, on the grassy edges of the road, a peasant girl will be often feeding her sheep, while one or two black goats mingled with the flock frolic and skip upon the old walls that surround the sacred precincts. A long arcaded portico leads to the church, and a door on the right admits to the cloisters. Opposite is the little cemetery, with a rusty iron gate and a stone flagged path leading between two raised plots of green, where the dead brothers lie, to a little mouldering chapel at the end. An air of gentle melancholy and quiet decay reign here, especially on a moist grey December afternoon, when it is spread with withered grasses and fallen yellow leaves. In such sweet and fainting echoes as these, lingering in the hollows of remote mountains, the sounds of the great enthusiasms that once moved all Europe die away and are lost.

The lesser-known places within reach of Bibbiena have nearly all some artistic or historic interest. Turning off from the high road about half way between here and Poppi, you can mount to the primitive little village of Memmenano close by and visit the church, where there is a Della Robbia relief of the Pentecost. This fine piece was originally in a church

at Bibbiena. It was torn down at some time, and the fragments were rescued by a discriminating priest of Memmenano, who carried them off and, putting them together, set them up in his little church, where the rich and elaborate work of art has a somewhat incongruous effect in its surroundings of pink-tinted walls and pitifully cheap little pictures. It is chiefly white on blue, and the figures are suggestive of Giovanni della Robbia's style, especially the Apostles, whose heads are heavy in type but have much animation and individuality; one or two are quite noble in expression. There is also an interesting old gilt crucifix, richly chased and enamelled, though now damaged by age, in the sacristy.[1]

On the other side of the river, but nearer to Bibbiena, is Buiano, with its ancient church, of which only a part remains standing. The building, which is of the eleventh or twelfth centuries, or perhaps earlier, must once have been of great size. From the outside may be seen traces of a triple apse, of which only the middle portion is left inside. There is a very good crypt, low and narrow, the vaulted roof supported on slender columns with simply carved capitals. It is now used as a cellar by the contadino who inhabits the picturesque farmhouse adjoining, and the rare visitor

[1] At Porrena, a village close to the station of the same name, between Poppi and Pratovecchio, and remarkable for its picturesque houses, there is a large Della Robbia Assumption, which, though only a school work, has a very beautiful and impressive effect in the bare and simple little sanctuary.

who desires to see it is accompanied by the *sposa*, with a candle, and by the whole patriarchal tribe, whose deep interest in the stranger is equalled by their wonder at anyone coming from "very far off" to see the *brutto posto*, where they keep their wine vats. "*Jesù Maria! Poverina!*" they exclaim, lifting their hands, moved by a kindly compassion for your evident mental infirmity.

It is a charming walk from Bibbiena along the eastern spur of the hill to Gressa, a ruined stronghold of the Bishops of Arezzo, which was besieged and taken by the Florentines in 1259. As the pleasant vineyards and ploughlands, and hedges thick with honeysuckle in spring, between which the road first goes, merge into oak woods spread out over a wild moorland, you see the little castellated hamlet sitting aloft upon the mountain side before you, above the russet forest, and wearing still a lordly feudal air. On a stormy day the sharp black shadow of a cloud will suddenly endow it with dramatic interest and revive the memory of its historic past, turning it into a symbol of pride and strength. But when you have climbed the steep flagged path, which is the only approach, this imposing ghost of a castle resolves itself into nothing more than a stone hovel or two, clinging to the rock beneath an old wall and a ruined ivy-grown tower. Through an ancient gateway you pass into a court surrounded by walls, within which stands a single tower, all that remains of the stronghold. The rest lies beneath the

uneven ground, grown over with grass, and a few slim trees. A flock of sheep feeds in this place at times, minded by an innocent-eyed girl. For Mars is dead here and the old god Pan has resumed his sway. And instead of the old fury of Guelf and Ghibelline, Gressa is shaken only by the wild tempests of the Apennines. What battles of the air one may witness from there on an autumn afternoon. The shroud of the sky rent into spaces of blue; the south-west billows black with wind, or spreading out grey in curtains of rain; the mountains towering in purple gloom, now swept into one pallor with sky and plain, now smitten into gold with a sudden sunbeam.

Marciano, also a castle of the Bishops of Arezzo, stands a little to the north of Gressa. Piled upon its rock, its few poor buildings so cunningly arranged as to appear a city in miniature, it has a still more impressive air than Gressa. In the swift change of sunshine and shadow it looks like some beautiful living thing, now hovering white and solitary in front of the gloomy gulf of the Archiano and the towering mountain wall behind, and anon marked in black against a sudden gleam of the hills. The pride and grace of these feudal villages that once endured storm and siege, liken them to fair ladies wooed by knightly suitors, who in despite of their scorn won them by stratagem and violence.

To the west of Bibbiena, up the valley of the Teggina, one of the Arno's tributaries, lie Ortignano

and Raggiolo, strong places once that knew more than one change of masters and were the scenes of some fierce fighting. But the valley with its quiet fields and murmuring stream, its steep woods of oak and chestnut, speaks only of peace to-day. There is a good road up it, of which the inhabitants are inordinately proud. I asked an old woman once the way to Raggiolo, and she answered me that I might go where I would, for there was a good road everywhere—a fact more interesting and important in her view, evidently, than a destination. For this is a country where the paths of life are something to be lingered over and enjoyed, not merely a means by which one hastens to an end.

Passing through S. Piera Frassino, with the high ridge of Uzzano on the left, you see before you Ortignano poised upon its hill-top, with the great wall of the Pratomagno behind. A steep path scales the rock up to it, but there is nothing of much interest in the village. The Pieve is a modern building, and a so-called fifteenth century Madonna within it has no great value; it may perhaps be a copy of an old master. Ortignano was at one time part of the episcopal domain of Arezzo, and later on belonged to the monks of Camaldoli. In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, however, it had fallen into the hands of the Conti Guidi di Bagno, who were wont to defy the devil and despoil their pious neighbours on occasion. Guido Novello II., grandson of the famous baron of that name,

appears to have been the last of the House to rule or misrule it. The Ubertini and the Tarlati then held sway by turns, and in 1349 the inhabitants, sick of changing from one oppressor to another, were easily persuaded by Florence to submit themselves to the Republic.

On the hillside above Ortignano is the old Badia a Tega, originally the Abbey of Selvamonda, a great religious house at the time when the Valley was more frequented. It was abandoned by the monks in 1422, and is now quite lost and forgotten among the woods from which it must have taken its name.

Raggiolo is about two miles further up the Teggina. The road climbs on, winding round the knees of the hills, which close in upon the narrowing valley. The lofty heights, shutting out the sunlight more and more as one proceeds, sweep downwards, thickly wooded, to the bed of the rocky torrent far beneath. Presently the glen opens, and Raggiolo lies before you, a huddle of houses at the foot of the mighty Pratomagno. The road descends to the level of the stream, and now one sees that the village is really built upon a little height jutting out from the hillside. From the bridge the view of it is exceedingly picturesque, standing up shapely and dignified upon the summit above, arrayed in heavy falling woods, and watered at its foot by two shining streams which come down on either side from the misty recesses of the Pratomagno and join at the foot of the little hill.

Raggiolo, though hidden so deeply within the mountains and mistress of nothing but the wild forest and rocky pastures, was an object of desire to mediæval barons. It was a convenient place wherein to hide your prisoners till the world forgot to inquire about them. Guido Novello II., who held Raggiolo as well as Ortignano, kept many a poor wretch chained in the dungeons of his strong tower on the hill, to whom he ordered his heirs in his will to make tardy compensation. He also left money to found a church and a hospital for pilgrims and for the sick here, in expiation perhaps of other dark deeds of which Raggiolo was the scene. A little later we find those noble freebooters the Tarlati, Pier Saccone and his son Marco, who overran all the hills in this part of the Casentino, in possession here, and in 1356, Count Roberto of Poppi, whose castles they had seized and whose lands they had harassed and sacked, collected an army and, penetrating up the valley, set siege to Raggiolo. Undeterred by the snow and bitter winds of a cold spring, he built little huts for his cross-bow men and assaulted the castle with such persistence that despair seized the defenders. But just as he was about to enjoy revenge at last, Florence, which with subtle policy always protected the weaker of the two parties in these feuds, stepped in and compelled the reluctant Count to relinquish his prey. The affair ended, as might easily have been foreseen, in the Republic itself ousting the Tarlati and taking possession of the disputed fief.

The Casentino and Its Story

The flagged path which ascends to the little town is the same steep and narrow way as in those old days when inaccessibility was the chief virtue in a dwelling-place. You pass up between grim stone houses, with black-browed archways and gloomy interiors, and win the height by sharp zigzag turns. The village is of considerable size, and remains of the massive masonry of the old castle are to be seen in the narrow squalid street. Over the ancient doorway of the church is sculptured the emblem of the Arte della Lana of Florence, the lamb carrying the banner, from which one may infer that the famous guild extended its protection and patronage to this foundation of Count Guido Novello, after Raggiolo had become Florentine. There is nothing of interest inside the church.

Beyond the village the chestnut forest begins again, climbing over the slopes upwards to the high hills. Sitting upon the huge mossy roots of one of the hoary old trees, you look back past the little town, down the long way which you have come, to where the valley opens out to the plain, and away beyond to the blue visionary hills, above which hovers the Rock of La Verna. At the bottom of the hill, beside the stream, there are green meadows, edged with poplars, cool and murmurous places to rest in on a summer's day. In winter time, too, you may find a pleasant place down there to sit upon a sunny rock well sheltered from the wind, and let your mind pause a while with the pensive mood of the year. The tall, knotted stems of the trees

are bare and grey above the silver stream; the pale sunshine smiles upon them and upon the boulders, upon the dead clumps of heather, the pallid grass, the rusty withered oaks. Through the trees comes the voice of an unseen child, singing a monotonous chant as she minds her sheep. Long, long ago Count Roberto and his bowmen ceased to trouble and ever since one day has been like another in Raggiolo, knowing no change except that slow pulse which imperceptibly fills the little cemetery on the hillside and renews the faces in the secular dwellings.

But there is a place not far off which is yet more remote than Raggiolo. Should anyone desire to find himself in an age so far back that the Middle Ages become comparatively modern and commonplace, let him visit Carda. It may be reached from Raggiolo by a two hours' scramble along the side of the Pratomagno, but to get a right impression of the place it should be approached by the longer way round, from Rassina, the next station to Bibbiena going towards Arezzo. Rassina is a good-sized town, and though it once had a castle and took some part in mediæval doings, it is now grown modern and uninteresting. Its one beauty is the river, no longer the rippling torrent of the upper Casentino, but swollen to a full broad tide, which flows between wide green pastures. On the hills round are the remains of many old castles, with some historic claim to notice. There is Chitignano on a ridge to the east, once the home of the

Ubertini. It has a picturesque ruined castle, in which some fine chambers still remain, with interesting relics of the old barons.

But to reach Carda one must cross the river and take the road westwards up the valley of the Soliggine, passing first through Socana, one of the most picturesque of Casentinese villages, where the exterior of the ancient Pieve, with its round tower, is a most picturesque and interesting example of early Romanesque architecture. Some miles further on lies Castel Focognano, once a place of strength and importance, which under its lords, the Giannellini, endured a siege of six months in 1322 from Bishop Guido de' Tarlati, who finally seized it by the help of a treacherous priest within, and sacked and burnt it. The path to Carda turns off to the left some distance before you get to Castel Focognano, and winds ever upwards and upwards, *sempre in su*. Leaving all cultivation far behind, it climbs through the endless chestnut forest and across rocky ravines noisy with little rills, till at length it comes out in a space of high moorland, bestrewn with boulders, upon the ridge of the hill. Following on through a natural gateway between two rocks, one finds oneself suddenly on the edge of a long and lonely valley, enclosed in the very heart of the hills. The lofty precipices which conceal it from the outer world are swept with chestnut woods from summit to base, where deep down runs a mountain torrent. And in this wilderness, into which one would suppose that

only hunters or lost travellers would stray, there appears far off, at the upper end of the valley, a gracious little city, seated at the foot of a towering mountain wall, like a white queen upon a throne reigning in the solitude of the gloomy hills. One feels that one has wandered all of a sudden into the enchanted period of "once upon a time." If there were cities in Arcady, they must have looked as Carda looks from the distance.

The day on which I saw it first was heavy and still, and the low clouds boding upon the mountain tops seemed to shut us into a world of dreams as we pursued our way along the hillside. A black-faced charcoal burner driving a string of asses laden with sacks was the only being we met for miles; the solitude began to have something strange, almost fearful, in it, and the distant city took on the air of a sorceress, as the sky lowered more and more over us. We passed at length by some rough stone built dwellings, and in a narrow field beyond, where the rocky ground opened out between the gnarled trunks of the chestnut trees and yielded soil for a few stunted vines, a group of old men, crooked, withered and hump-backed, were digging; they rested, bent upon their spades, as we passed and looked up at us with squinting eyes.

Soon we emerged from the haunted woodland and descending, found ourselves beneath the village. Carda is built upon a low spur of the Pratomagno, encircled at its foot by streams and green pastures, and is sheltered

on all sides by the high mountains: it is a little oasis in the rocky wilderness and enjoys a soft mild climate even in winter. The valley is thick with apple trees which in spring embower it in blossom and make it a veritable Garden of Eden. But the little town itself is an example of the old adage: distance lends enchantment to the view. On climbing up to it one experiences the disillusion which would probably ensue could one actually walk into that past which seems so full of colour and romance to us now. In Carda primitiveness shows itself in a dark squalor which is not even very picturesque. The houses are roughly built of stone, sometimes just the boulders from the hillside or the bed of the stream, piled one upon another. The steep and narrow ways that wind through the huddle of dwellings are heaped with filth. Only the church, which stands in the highest part of the village, is comparatively modern, an eighteenth century restoration. It is dedicated to Santa Fiora and Santa Lucilla, who are represented with other saints in an interesting fourteenth century painting in the church. There is also a glazed figure of the Madonna, enthroned in a niche, which the people regard with very great devotion. They relate how two soldiers in the Spanish wars of the eighteenth century found it in a broken shrine in a far-distant part and carried it home here to their native village. It appeared to us to be quite worthless from an artistic point of view and hardly of antiquity enough to bear out its history.

The Gateway of the Valley

Carda was, it appears, like so many of these Apennine villages, much more in the world in the Middle Ages than it is now. When the great ones of the earth preferred to dwell upon inaccessible rocks, the neighbourhood round must have been a very choice place of residence. In fact, upon the mountain spurs are ruins of many an old castle. Civitella Secca, a little to the east of Carda, keeps still its ruined walls and ancient cistern. These abandoned homes of the dramatic past are surrounded in the imagination of the people with superstitious terrors. Once, it is said, a band of peasants was sent to demolish a deserted stronghold above the Casolari, a village upon a hillside to the south, but they were met by a shower of stones and rocks, hurled upon them by invisible hands as they approached, and fled in great haste, nor could anyone be persuaded to renew the attempt.

Carda's most important neighbour was the Abbey of Sta. Trinita dell' Alpi, which lay upon the side of the Pratomagno some miles to the south, and from which the slopes about there have taken the name of the Alpi di Sta. Trinita. This abbey had arisen in the place of a simple hospice, built by some hermits near a spring of sweet water which thirsty wayfarers called Fonte Benedetta, the Blessed Well. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries it was very rich and powerful, enjoying revenues and estates granted to it by the great barons around, the Pazzi of Valdarno, the Ubertini and others. Carda was at one time its vassal. The monastery de-

clined later, and hardly any monks were left there in the fifteenth century, and a hundred years later it was abandoned by all save one solitary hermit. It is now but a ruin.



RAGGIOLO



WITH DISTAFF AND SPINDLE

CHAPTER XI

BEFORE AND AFTER

"Il gregge passa il guado.
Il mulino rintrona.
Solingo è un fonte nella Falterona."

THE story of the Casentino belongs to the Middle Ages. That was the period of its vivid existence. To the eagle flight of the heroes of mediæval history the mountains presented little obstruction, and the barrier which divides the Casentinese from their fellow-men was then least effective in keeping out the influences of the great world. But after that time the Valley seems to have returned to the Arcadian peace and simplicity of its primitive days. Modern progress has indeed to some extent invaded the little towns beside the river, where factories have sprung up and a little railway crawls along, but it has hardly yet crept up the

mountain sides. Here amid the Etrurian shades little has changed in the course of thousands of years except the faces of the people and some proportion of their blood. Etruria is now called Tuscany, and the Etruscans who once inhabited the Casentino have utterly passed away and been forgotten, except by those learned enough to recognise the traces which they have left here and there, such as the sepulchres found at Certomondo and near Romena and in other parts of the Valley, and the mass of votive offerings dug up on Falterona in 1830. Their conquerors the Romans have also vanished, at least in name, and are only recalled by the vestiges of a temple or the occasional disinterment of household vessels and coins belonging to their period. Dante witnesses to a lucky find of this sort. *I myself*, he says, *have seen the place on the side of a mountain in Tuscany, called Falterona, where the meanest peasant in all the country side, digging, found more than a bushel of santelénas of finest silver, which perhaps had been awaiting him for more than a thousand years.*[1]

But the Casentinese to-day, though their blood may be changed by admixture with that of the northern invaders of later centuries, still feed their flocks upon the hills and grow their vines and corn in the fertile plain beside the river as their Latin ancestors did, and who can doubt, noticing the many wayside shrines, that the old protectors of roads and fields and woods are

[1] *Convivio*, 4, xi. The word "santeléna" was used first for Byzantine coins, and afterwards for any sort of coin.



A Farmhouse.

still invoked under new names? That noblest characteristic of paganism which carried religion into all the most intimate affairs of domestic life, and gave an ideal significance to material things, still survives here. Every household has its deities of the hearth and home, represented by an image of the Madonna or of some saint placed in the living-room or above the entrance of the house. St. Antonio presides over the safety and health of the oxen in the stable, if only in a cheap coloured print, and above the roadside fountain, where the great white beasts are led to drink in the evening twilight, the cross will be seen, planted between two soaring cypresses. Even such a prosaic function as the spring cleaning keeps here the character of a religious obligation. On a day appointed by the Church —in the week before Easter—the priest comes with the holy water and sprinkles all the chambers of the house, which is prepared for the blessing by a grand scouring from roof to floor.

The patriarchal style of the contadino's household is surely also descended from classic times. Within the one living room of the great rambling farmhouse will be gathered several generations, from the white-haired *nonno* (grandfather) to the *bimbo* of a few days old. There is the head of the house and his wife, the *sposa* his sons and daughters, and if the eldest son is old enough to be married there will be also the daughter-in-law and her children, with various stray or orphaned offshoots of the family. The great dark stone kitchen

which they inhabit looks strangely bare and comfortless to Northern eyes, with its meagre contents, a few wooden chairs, a table and the great oaken chest—the *madia*—in which the bread is made, and perhaps a simple cupboard. But how cool and wholesome in the summer heat, more to be feared than the winter cold, even here in the Apennines. And it has always the incomparable decoration of rows of shining copper vessels ranged against the wall, some of them often of good antique shape, descended from father to son. Lighted by a high window and by the glow thrown out from the sticks flaming upon the hearth within the deep recess of the chimney-place, the spacious room is a picturesque setting for the lively crowd within it—kerchiefed women in bright-coloured petticoats, men and boys in blue shirts, and children whose great dark eyes and pure curves of cheek and chin are aureoled in the curling gold or bronze of their hair. Besides the human beings there are the cats, dozing placidly upon the hot stones of the hearth, and the big white sheep-dog, that steals in, hoping vainly not to be seen, and meets expostulation with pleading and deprecatory eyes. Intrusive chickens are everywhere, and snow-white doves, the aristocrats of the farmyard, come stepping daintily across the threshold, entering into the darkness from the radiance outside like spirits from another sphere. They nod their heads and make a stately investigation of the chamber.

The whole miscellaneous company dwells together

in apparent amity and kindness. Nobody scolds or grumbles, or tumbles over another. There are no sharp angles or rigid heavy muscles in these supple Tuscan bodies; they can accommodate themselves to very narrow spaces. Nor do those personal rights and privileges appear to exist which provoke domestic war sometimes in more advanced societies. Everything is in common. Even the grandfather has no special place by the fireside. The young mother occupies the warmest corner within the great chimney-place when she unswaddles her babe, letting the tender little limbs move and curl and kick freely in the warmth from the blaze upon the hearth before she winds it up again upon its cushion, in that fashion which is itself immemorial. She does not appear, however, to have any vested interest, so to speak, in that particular seat. Nor has the youngest toddler any stool of his own to defend sturdily with his fists from an encroaching brother, but creeps in contentedly into the family circle, under somebody's knee or round his mother's skirts, secure of love and kisses, the only rights which he knows or cares about. The principle of *meum* and *tuum* does not prevail among these simple folk, perhaps because they have so little beyond the elementary necessaries, of which there is abundance for all. The want of it anyhow seems favourable to the more amiable of the social virtues.

Yet the place of each is ordered, according to ancient custom, in the contadino's family. The *sposa*

stays within doors and does the *faccende* of the house, cleanses the kitchen by that Tuscan method of sweeping with sawdust and a little sprinkle of water, which takes the place of our stout Northern scrubbings; cooks the *polenta*, a mess of maize or chestnut flour, for the morning meal, in the huge black cauldron suspended over the fire, and prepares the soup of vegetables and bread for supper. Every few days she fills the great blackened oven outside the door with flaming faggots, and when it is well heated, rakes them out and puts in her rounds of well-kneaded dough and presently draws forth the flat crisp loaves, baked an even golden brown all over. This bread, the sweetest and most delicious that one can well taste, is made of the wheat grown on the farm, and is the staple food of the family. On such pure wholesome fare it is no wonder that their limbs grow strong and straight and that sweet and generous blood runs in their veins.

Meanwhile the contadino himself is busy perhaps outside, stacking fuel or leaves for winter fodder, or attending to his beasts. The one rambling building serves to house the live stock as well as the family. It is usually set upon the slope of the hill, and is a collection of irregular roof lines and unequal stories, broken by loggias and archways and outside stairs; and its rusty tiles and white-washed walls are patched with the green of a vine or the sprawling shadow of an old fig tree. Turkeys, geese and fowls of all sorts cackle and cluck around it; the white doves have their



CONTADINO'S FIRESIDE.

nesting-places in the roof. Beneath or adjoining the living-room is the stable in which the oxen are stalled, a large sweet-smelling place, where in the daytime the calves, and young beasts not yet ready for the plough, huddle at the further end all warm and white in the darkness, with wistful faces turning to the light from the opened door. A little flock of sheep is housed in another cavernous chamber; they come forth, foolish and timid, from under a deep archway, and a small boy or girl drives them down the steep paths between the vines, to feed beside the river. From another dark recess of the farmhouse comes the grunting of pigs.

The rest of the family are at work out in the fields. In the autumn the sowing of the wheat will be in progress, the first labour of the agricultural year. Formerly the peasant would only sow his wheat while the moon was waxing, but now he is modern enough to regulate his proceedings by the state of the ground and of the weather, though with less important crops he still religiously observes the old rule, convinced that otherwise his lettuces, or beans, or whatever it may be, would come spindly and poor. His methods in any case are not modern. Nothing makes the present seem more one with the immemorial past than the spectacle of the sower casting the seed over the roughly turned-up soil, with a long sway of his arm from side to side, and the ploughman following in his wake turning over the great rolls of earth to cover in the seed. The heavy-bodied oxen step painfully in

the furrows, straining their necks and twisting their uneasy heads, as with labouring breath they drag the primitive wooden plough through the deep soil. These rhythmic movements of man and beast seem a part of the earth's own process, accordant alike with stars and seasons to some elemental harmony. Their slowness has in it the feeling of eternity. Time for the Tuscan husbandman moves in large periods; it is not broken up into minutes. He has no watch, but the broad divisions of the day are plain to him by natural evidences, which old custom further marks by linking them with religious thoughts. At midday the church bells ring out and tell him that the sun has once again reached the zenith; in the evening, at the *venti quattro*, the last hour of the twenty-four, which follows the sunset in Tuscan reckoning, they will sound the Ave Maria, and the re-announcement of man's hope, carried on the breath of the dying day far across the fields, is lost in the older message that the hour of rest for man and beast is come. The long periods between are broken at regular times by the appearance of a girl or woman in the field, carrying on her head a basket covered with a clean white cloth and containing the meal of polenta or bread, with perhaps a bottle of thin wine. If the house is close by the *sposa* will herself bring it out and share with the rest, for to eat out of doors is natural to these people. The little children toddle after her; the vine leaves and their hair, and the spiders' webs that lace the dark furrows on an

autumn morning make a mist of gold together, beneath the glowing blue of the sky. Others of the family, men and women both, who have been breaking up the clods of earth in a field hard by, cast down their hoes and gather to the meal; others come from picking up wood or collecting acorns. Elders and young ones together seat themselves in a circle on the ground and eat, chatting and laughing. The great sheep-dog squats on his haunches beside them. If a stranger be near, they offer him a share of their bread with an engaging ease and kindliness. They do not know embarrassment or *mauvaise honte*.

Seen out here in the sunny fields, their life has an idyllic aspect, and though they have their grievances, the contadini families of the Casentino and of Tuscany generally seem to have many grounds of content. They have a sense of possession in the farms which they work, for in return for their labour they halve the produce with the owner, paying no rent and taking no wage, according to the old *mezzadria* system which prevails in Tuscany. Their share of the produce is abundant for their simple wants. Children are no anxiety; the more the contadino has the better, for he has to supply enough labour to work the farm, or *podere*, which he has undertaken, and must hire if his family is not equal to it. The little ones are made useful when quite small in minding sheep or picking up leaves and acorns. Neither labour nor material is wasted here. It is pretty to watch the elder ones

teaching the four and five-year-olds to mind the animals. "Corri, fuggi"—run, run,—they say, and the little thing, armed with a tiny stick, springs off after some straying member of the flock. And so they grow up, healthy and joyous creatures of the sun and the fine Apennine air; mostly unable to read or write, but instructed in the ancient lore of tradition and alive to the wisdom of forest and stream which more cultivated people forget.

There is plenty for all to do on the farm. The women must cut the grass for the beasts in the stalls, and carry it up in big baskets on their heads. The leaves must be stripped from the trees before they fall in the autumn, and stacked round the trunks for winter fodder. Collecting the acorns, which the accommodating beasts of this country also eat and flourish on, occupies the whole family for many days. In the spring, when the sap begins to rise, the men have to prune the vines, and presently you will see every mutilated stem gemmed with a dewdrop of its vital juice. Hay harvest comes, and all day long men and women together stoop and sweep the tall grasses and the pink *lupinella* into long swathes with their hooks. Then, when the wheat fields turn golden in July, they are reaped in the same manner, and the little ricks grow up behind the farmhouse, each round a central pole, and a wisp of straw is bound across each pole at the top, making *the venerable sign* of the Christian faith to sanctify the golden store. The *gran turco* (maize)

ripens and is cut, and the family sit on the ground and strip the sheaths, with their fez-like tassels, from the seed cones; these are hung up against the house wall to dry, and soon every homestead is draped with a gorgeous orange curtain. Then there is the thrashing of the corn, with flails, on the *aja*, or stone paved threshing floor beside the house, though it must be confessed that in many Casentinese farms in the Valley this is now done by a thrashing machine. Fairs and weekly markets must be attended also, and beasts bought and sold.

But chief of all the year's doings is the *vendemmia*. The wine of the Casentino has always enjoyed a good repute. Lorenzo the Magnificent was well acquainted with its quality, and used to send barrels of it to his friends. All the lower slopes of the hills are covered with vineyards, and at a little distance appear to be stuck all over with trees out of a Noah's ark. These are the little pollards—*pioppi*, in local parlance, though they are not poplars, but maples—up which the vines are trained. They make a sort of tent for the tender plant beneath, protecting it to some extent from the dreaded assault of hailstorms, without obstructing the streams of sunshine, which are distilled within the fruit into a sweetness such as nothing else on earth yields. So intense is it, that it would seem as if the palate could scarcely endure it, and yet so exquisite that it never cloys. The sensation of eating ripe grapes just gathered from the vine is an ecstasy as near to

that of feasting gods as the gross mortal sense may attain to.

No bacchanalian rites accompany the vintage nowadays. But there is a wild gaiety and jollity about the proceedings, a sort of instinctive sacrifice of joy and thanksgiving to bounteous Nature, with songs and laughter and love-making. Let us picture an October morning in a Casentinese vineyard. The sky is an ineffably limpid blue and the lofty shapes of the hills rise cloudlike against it. All down the slope run golden lines of pioppi, wreathed in translucent vine leaves and thickly hung with purple and rosy grapes. All is quiet, and the heavy clusters of fruit depend almost to the ground and seem about to fulfil their natural destiny. But suddenly a shout is heard, a tumult of voices. Down the steep path comes rushing a crowd of boys and youths, with the dark eyes of fawns, and white teeth that come and go with the play of sweet smiles. They are followed by barefooted girls, their skirts tucked up over bright-hemmed petticoats; lithe-limbed men whose shirts are open over sun-blackened chests; matrons, large and stately of form, poising baskets on their heads, and perhaps in the midst of all, moving majestic, a tall, ancient woman, her grey head bound with a kerchief knotted behind, her noble feet bare in the furrows. With wild cries the boys spring up into the trees, and their glowing faces disappear and reappear between the broad leaves as they heap up the baskets which they have hung to



THE VINTAGE.

the boughs. Others bring short ladders of primitive construction. The women and girls stretch up and slit the bunches from the lower stems, or kneel and sever those upon the long trails which the boys toss down from the trees. *Bambini*, in gay coloured rags, toddle and squat around, the cupids of the scene, or swarm up the stems of the trees, looking like monkeys in a Renaissance pattern. All is astir with joyous movement. The little groups chatter and banter one another, boys and girls play together, or stop to strip the grapes from the ripest bunches and eat them appreciatively, carrying on their pleasant labour in a lazy laughing fashion, in the dreamy glow of the afternoon. From a tree a little apart comes the monotonous sound of a *stornello*, uttered by a youth hidden among the leaves, a strange minor refrain which gives a note of melancholy to the careless gaiety of the vintagers.

In the corner of the vineyard a row of *bigonie* is set, the wooden tubs with flattened sides into which the baskets are emptied. The contadino beats upon the heaped-up fruit with a heavy stone or club, till the juice flows and seethes. Down the steep path comes a pair of oxen, with a slow swaying of their milk-white sides, drawing a low wooden cart of rude shape and make, or perhaps the *treggia*, which is constructed of osiers and set upon runners. The bigonie are lifted in, heavy with their rich contents, and are slowly dragged up to the homestead by the panting beasts. In the great cool stone chamber, where the wine is to be made,

the contadini take long poles, and plunge them into the mass of grapes in the tubs, working them up and down vigorously, till the red juice spurts up and the fruit begins to foam. Then with an admirably rhythmic movement two of the younger men together lift each heavy tub, after it has been weighed under the padrone's eye, and plump it down upon a bench beside the monstrous vat which occupies a corner of the place, and leaping up themselves, they take hold of it again, and swinging it with a strong effort of their flexible bodies up above their heads, they upset it into the vat. The pressing of the grapes is still done in many parts of Italy in the classic fashion by the feet of youths or "dancing girls," but the Casentinese husbandman has in this point departed from the picturesque practice of his fathers. At a later stage of the process, however, when the great *tino* is full and several days are past, and you can hear the contents seething and simmering noisily within, one of the men will step into the vat and move gently about upon the mass of stuff that has come to the top, so as to break it up. But his careful movements have none of the riotous joy of the old method; there is no foam, no splashing of purple juice.

Yet the fumes of the new wine are still intoxicating. The air for weeks is full of the odour of fermenting grapes. And everywhere you see grapes, grapes. The little children, their faces and garments smeared with juice, come carrying great pointed clusters. Donkeys pass along the roads in strings, each with a couple of

purple-stained bigonie slung across his long-suffering back. Women march by twos and threes, one behind the other, like figures upon a Greek vase, bearing upon their heads round baskets heaped with the choicest of the fruit. This has been kept back to "govern" the wine, which means that it will be spread out in a cool airy chamber for several weeks till it begins to wither, and will then be added to the new wine, to increase the strength and flavour with its intensified sweetness. Through the open door of every *cantina* you see the men gathered round the wine-press, and the crimson streams flowing, as the *vinaccia*—the dregs from the vat, when the wine has been drawn off—is crushed anew that it may yield the last drop of sweetness. Soon every farmyard will be littered with the refuse from the wine-press, and carts loaded with it will lumber by continually. How beautiful sometimes the long drawn-out teams of oxen, and the blue-shirted charioteers upright upon the purple heaps, slowly passing, with laughter and song, crimsoned in the glow of the autumn evening!

And the kindliness and hospitality of these mountain folk brims up and overflows at this season. Every face smiles, every hand offers grapes. You cannot eat fast or long enough, and your dwelling-place is garlanded with *treccie*, those great decorative clusters which the people put together so deftly, cunningly interweaving the stalks.

At every season the Casentinese seem a cheerful

folk. The whole population of a village lives sociably together in the street. The women bring out the little looms, with which they weave straw for hats in their leisure time, and sit in the sunshine working and chatting. Others spin with the distaff or knit. Men stand in groups and talk. They can all do nothing contentedly. I once asked a small herd girl as I sat with her on the hillside what the men did when it rained. *Stanno in casa a ridere*, she answered promptly—(they stay at home and laugh). She herself had her share of philosophy under misfortune. "I have lost my sheep," she said, counting the little flock around us; "there were eight and now there are only six." But she did not trouble to seek them, and as I went on my way later I saw the two missing sheep, a long way off, browsing peacefully on somebody else's pasture. She had little fear of consequences. Children are privileged beings in the Casentino. You rarely hear them cry—why should they? The tear-compelling discipline of more advanced communities does not exist here. They never get into mischief, for nothing matters. Their mothers love them with a fierce and passionate devotion, and all the rest of the world pets them and plays with them. They swarm in the village streets, the bigger ones caring for the toddlers with a touching affection, and the men as they pass by catch up the babies and hug them. Their life is as natural and untroubled as any young animal's.

Only when winter comes some of them suffer cold

and hunger. Many of the people in the villages are very poor. The ordinary labourer depends for his living on being hired by a contadino. His wage is a franc a day, and a good man may look to be employed about half the year. On this income he keeps himself and his wife and little children. Some of these poorer ones help themselves from what they consider their neighbours' overplus. "We must have apples," or potatoes, or whatever it may be, "and if we have not got any, what will you?" I have an acquaintance who is an adept at putting this simple philosophy into practice. Assunta has rare abilities. She is very poor, but she has the best of what is to be got around. When the *fagiuoli* (beans) are ripe in her neighbours' fields, Assunta takes tithe of the earliest and biggest pods. No one knows so well where the grass grows sweetest in a *podere*, or can wield a hook to such good purpose. Should you meet a woman near the village where she lives, bearing a bundle of green stuff upon her head with more grace and gaiety than another, where all are graceful and most are gay, it will be Assunta carrying home her spoil to dry and sell. The first of the potatoes, wherever they grow, are hers, and though she has no vineyard, Assunta has new wine before anyone else. She has a goodly store of chestnuts in the winter, which have grown on somebody else's trees, and they are all *marroni*, the biggest and sweetest to eat. In her secret storehouse there are *fichi dottati* too, the most luscious of all figs, gathered from the best tree for miles around, in the

garden of a priest, who finds them gone just at that precise moment of maturity when he has determined to pick them. She is open-handed too, and brings the most golden apples and juiciest pears to her friends, relating with an engaging frankness how and where she obtained them. Assunta has many frailties, which she confesses to the *fratino* (little Brother), who descends from the Rock up there in the south-east to teach the people of judgment and of salvation. But the Inferno with which he threatens her if she returns to her old ways is too far off a contingency to weigh much upon this creature, so quick to the taste of the moment, so swift in her changing moods. And by her neighbours much is forgiven to Assunta, for her gifts and charms are the delight of all. She has the beauty and the swiftness of a mountain cat. She laughs, she plains, she prays, all in one breath. Her face is a flash of splendid teeth; Mino or Desiderio might have sculptured its fine Florentine features. There was a time when Assunta outdid all her fellows at work or play; no other cut the corn so untiringly or bore the *ceste*, heavy with grapes, so bravely upon her head, or danced and sang like she did. But now poverty and child-bearing have told upon her; she can only hoarsely quaver out the endless *rispetti* with which her memory is stored, in that voice of hers, like harp-strings touched to a laughter that is almost a sob, and behind the vivid personality you perceive the tragedy of Eve's curse and of the passing years.

Where thieving is so tolerantly looked upon, begging is quite an honourable profession. The village beggar in his wonderful coat, made up of so many patches and painted such various colours by wind and weather that it almost rivals Joseph's, seems to mix on equal terms with the rest of the sociable community. His lot does not seem altogether unenviable. The very small amount of sustenance which keeps him alive is provided by the compassionate. He sits all day on the steps of church or palace where the sun falls hottest, and in the torrid days he moves into the cool shadow of archway or portal. On the one day of the week when begging is allowed in Tuscan villages he puts on his professional whine and his armoury of curses for the hard-hearted, and goes forth on his rounds, one of a long train of cripples, blind men, and ancient, wild-haired women, who flourish their distaffs as they hobble after their prey. Then in this land of San Francesco there are those other beggars, the voluntary followers of Holy Poverty, labourers in spiritual fields who are worthy of their hire at the hands of their fellow-men. One sees them everywhere; sturdy Franciscan friars trudging through dust and heat; little sisters that shuffle along in patient pairs, in their brown gowns, and with wide hats flapping over the close-coifed downcast faces, the younger of the two carrying a sack over her shoulder; meek nuns of the more ancient Benedictine order, veiled in black and slowly guiding an ass between them, upon which they have bound the great basket or can

in which they are collecting scraps from the charitable for the orphans or sick people whom they house and care for. Nothing in the mountains is more touching than the spectacle of these gentle monastic figures toiling along, often so wearily, in the midst of the vast landscape.

And what sights the mountain roads and ways yield. Now it is a little child perhaps, with sunlit hair leading a pair of young oxen, fair white beasts, with tender sleek sides and gentle eyes ; an old contadino, her grandfather, behind, holding the ropes of the yoke. Now a crone bowed to the ground beneath a great burden of faggots ; or a girl riding upon an ass, may be seated sideways in meek feminine fashion like the Madonna in a picture of the Flight into Egypt, or very likely proudly mounted up astride upon her high saddle. Strange what a stately air that patient beast, the ass, lends to his riders. A fat and solemn priest in cassock and broad hat slowly descending a mountain path upon a sleek and well-fed steed of the kind is the very image of grave and reverend dignity.

But to see these things one must abandon the broad frequented roads and climb up the hillsides to the out-of-the-way places. In far-away villages, shut in by the quiet and solitude of the chestnut woods—such as Cetica, Montemignaio, Carda—the mountain ways seem quite unspoilt by contact with the world. An Arcadian simplicity and equality prevail here ; the social distinction of rich and poor is unknown. A primitive pride



A Contadina.

and sense of freedom look out of the frank fearless eyes of the people. They will often refuse money, if you offer it to them. They are mostly *piccoli possidenti*, an expression ill rendered by *piccoli possidenti*, for their possessions are so very insignificant. A little slice of chestnut forest and of the rocky sterile hillside belongs to each family; a poor estate, certainly, but their own. They have a few sheep, a goat or two—those gay creatures of the *dente velenosa*, the tooth which loves the young shoots and works havoc in the woods—a few meagre fowls, and the indispensable ass. The grim, squalid mountain home shelters both man and beast, as in the farms lower down, but here Christians, ass and sheep all enter at the same door.

Charcoal burning is one of the chief industries in these places. There are hardly any vines, and where a few have been grown on a bit of ground terraced up with infinite patience upon the hillside, they yield but scantily. The only harvest is the chestnuts, which provide flour for polenta and take the place of bread, a sweet and cloying substitute to an unaccustomed palate. When October comes the whole community turns out into the woods and searches for the fallen fruit in the litter of leaves upon the ground, and the forest places are astir with figures, simple sylvan creatures in red and russet and orange garments, that look like a part of the earth. Chestnuts are the only trees that are spared to old age on the hills; though lopped and mutilated they escape destruction on account of their fruit. What

hoary veterans, with huge hollow boles and grey wrinkled bark like an elephant's skin, people the woods! All day the gatherers stay at their work, and in the warm dusk of the autumn evening you may meet them wending homewards in straggling procession, the men bowed beneath heavy sacks, the women carrying baskets on their heads, the little children lagging behind or riding pick-a-back upon their elders; a strangely pathetic spectacle marked out against the dim mountains and sombre crimson sky.

When the chestnuts are all collected they are put into a *seccatoio*, a little stone building with an upper floor upon which the fruit is laid, while a wood fire is lighted below, to dry it with the smoke. Afterwards they are separated from the husks by a curious process of threshing. They are thrown into a big tub set against the wall, and a man wearing heavy wooden shoes studded with wooden nail-heads jumps into the tub and grasping two rings fastened in the wall dances energetically upon the chestnuts. When they have been well crushed the contents of the tub are sifted by women standing around, and are then ready to be ground into meal. The *seccatoio* often adjoins the peasant's house, but where the village is at some distance, it stands by itself in the midst of the woods. You will often come upon one unexpectedly in the solitary glade, and seeing the smoke issuing from the holes beneath the roof, and perhaps an old withered man, bent double beneath a burden of logs outside, may recall some goblin tale

of your childhood and think you see a sorcerer's den, until you learn what it is. On the high slopes are other strange things; here a scaffold of wood newly prepared as if for some sacrificial rite; there a great tumulus, with smoke bursting out all round it in jets, as if the ashes of a dead chieftain were smouldering within. Another and yet another will be seen close by. And all these things appear to come without hands, for a human being is rarely to be seen. But they are only the work of some charcoal burner, whom very likely you have met on the path below, going down behind his laden mules or asses. Within the tumuli a quantity of wood is being slowly charred. *Bracie*, the small kind of charcoal used in brasiers and in *scaldini*, is also prepared up here. The peasants make a heap of twigs, cut from the low stunted beechwood which covers the mountain sides in some places, and set it alight. When it has blazed up well they fling water upon it and quench it suddenly. You may be surprised, when walking or driving in the Valley some evening after dark, to see high up upon the dim shapes of the mountains great rings of fire glow out. They look like the lights of a palace brightly illumined for a feast, only you know that up there no human beings dwell. Suddenly, as you look, they will go out, and the place where they appeared will be withdrawn again into the mystery of night.

Upon the grassy slopes of the Falterona and the other high summits, large flocks of sheep pasture through the summer months under the guard of

shepherds and dogs. In May or June they come, wending up the steeps, and when the chestnuts begin to fall you will meet them descending again through the woods, or wandering slowly along the valley roads, the ewes accompanied by the young autumn lambs, pathetic little stragglers. The shepherds carry the newly-born ones, holding them by the forelegs, while the mothers follow close, baaing anxiously. These plaintive wayfarers have a long ten days' journey before them, to the Tuscan Maremma, that strange marshy region that lies between the mountains and the sea, and whence all who can flee in summer for terror of miasma, returning in the winter to till its fertile stretches. Not only the vagrant shepherds, but numbers of field labourers from the hills go down in the winter months to the Maremma. Their women folk, as much inured to work as they, go too, unless they have very young children. Many of the hill villages are almost abandoned then; only the feeble elders and the women with little ones being left, to drag out the long weary days, often shut in by snow or by thick clouds.

At that time, the season of bad weather and long dark nights, these mountains, though they have no very fearful precipices, no eternal snows or glaciers to hurl down avalanches, are not without terrors. There is always the danger of sudden storms, or of mists that wrap you round silently, through which you see "not otherwise than a mole through skin."[1] The unknown

[1] *Purgatorio*, C. xvii., v. 3.

ways are perilous, and even the natives may lose themselves easily in the wild and rocky wastes. I remember an inhabitant of the Valley describing to me his adventures with a little party of hunters one day on the pathless ridges of the Pratomagno. They had started out very early, and had climbed and wandered for many hours in pursuit of game, till the autumn evening began to draw in, and being by that time very hungry they turned their steps for home. They walked and walked, but the landmarks which they expected to see did not appear. They had evidently gone farther than they had thought. Let them, however, but climb that shoulder of hill before them and some familiar point would surely be in sight. No, there was yet another slope before them. They struggled on, weary and apprehensive. But when the brow was at last reached, the wilderness of mountain ranges spread out around in the fading light was altogether strange. Dismay seized them. They did not know which way to turn. It was now nearly dark, and rain was beginning to fall heavily. They wandered aimlessly and miserably on. After a long time one of the company caught sight of the glimmer of a light in the distance, and making their way towards it they entered into a wood and came to a solitary house from which the light shone. The door was opened to their knock and they saw that it was a *seccatoio* in which a number of peasants were gathered after the work of the day, and had settled themselves

to sleep upon the heaps of chestnuts that lay on the floor. The wanderers were welcomed with the liveliest hospitality, and were fed with the best that was to be had, chiefly chestnuts. But when they proposed to continue their way and inquired about the road, the peasants lifted up their hands. Poppi! Strada! They had heard of such places, but hardly knew where they were. What was the nearest village? They named a place leagues away from where the lost sportsmen had thought to find themselves. Moreover, to attempt to get there was madness; there was no road, dangerous ravines lay between, and no one would risk his neck to guide them by night. There was nothing for it but to wait where they were till day. The peasants gave them the choicest places upon the chestnuts, and they slept as well as they could upon their novel couch. But one of the party—a young priest—had a sick mother at home, and he wept all night, thinking of her anxiety at his non-appearance. When morning came they thanked their kindly hosts, one of whom guided them along devious and difficult paths, which even by daylight were sufficiently hazardous, back at last to the haunts of men.

With winter and the exodus of so many of the people silence and melancholy fall upon the hills. But at happier times the old songs and gaiety echo up here, where custom changes even less than in the Valley. Everywhere the Casentinese peasant loves to dance or shout, but in the more accessible places the infection of

modern ways has somewhat touched his pleasures; he discards the old steps for new, and the quaint traditional usages at Carnival and on other festive occasions have been gradually abandoned for less characteristic jollities. There is not so much dancing on summer nights in the streets. But still to this day, in the remote villages, the people gather together after the chestnut gathering, and frolic and laugh in the warm autumn darkness, and those with nimble heels and good breath fall into the *trescone*, the characteristic dance of the country, once the favourite amusement at every fair and festa. The trescone is a primitive sort of dance, with a kind of dramatic play in it. It is founded on the simple old theme of courtship. The two dancers catching hands, spring out together into the middle of the circle made by the spectators, falling into the time of the music like swimmers settling to the measure of the waves. They circle round and round one another, the man breaking into absurdly insinuating actions, prancing before the woman with hornpipe-like steps, his knees crooked this way and that, while she, poised like a queen, glides backwards from him with a thousand little unseen steps as he advances, inviting him onwards with a coquettish little swaying of the hips, and anon spinning round and round. The dance is varied by the invention of the performers with different movements, and the pace quickens and quickens with the ever-hastening beat of the music, till, breathless and exhausted, they fling

themselves apart into the midst of the onlookers, who scream applause. In a favourite variation of the trescone a flask of wine plays a prominent part. The dance is then a figure of three, in which the two men contend for the graces of one woman, the ugly and comic suitor endeavouring by the offer of a flask of wine to ingratiate himself with the fair one and allure her affections from his more favoured rival. The three circle round and round with the most diverting gestures, the fortunate suitor showing forth all his graces, contorting himself into the most wonderful scissor-like shapes, while the comic performer, relying on grosser attractions, courts the lady by continually thrusting his flask under her nose with an absurdly appealing air, and she, with mocking disdain, curtseys as she whirls round him and then turns her back. He, firmly resolved to touch her heart, sets the big straw flagon on his head and wheels round her, balancing it with extreme gravity. Still she is scornful. At last in desperation he plants the flask upon the ground and all three take hands and dance round it, kicking up their feet over it in turns, always with the same admirably rhythmic movements. On the occasion when I saw it danced the play was brought to an unexpected end by the rejected lover, who suddenly sat down on the ground, and lifting the flask to his lips sought consolation in a lengthy pull, to the dismay of the other two, who fell upon him with screams of laughter and protest to get their share of the wine.

The music was provided by a dreamy-looking individual with an accordion, a somewhat doleful instrument which he managed to ply with vigorous effect. The woman dancer was a comely, middle-aged dame, long married and stout, but she held herself with rare stateliness, and moved with incomparable grace and lightness and verve. A little unshaven man, a field labourer, also by no means young, was the comic performer, and played his part with a wealth of humour and ready invention. His rival was an exceedingly neat, minute young fellow, whose legs seemed literally bewitched by the spirit of dancing. I never saw such graceful capering; he would have gone on for ever, if only the breath of the others would have held out. He was evidently inspired by the enthusiasm of an artist, but he was the only young person in the company who could or would dance the trescone, and it is grievous to think that perhaps before long this interesting and classic dance will be altogether displaced by the tame waltzes and schottisches which the younger generation prefers.

But let no thought of saddening progress trouble us here. We are in the mountains where we need open our ears to no sound of human life that is not almost as immemorial as the chestnut trees. Listen to the song that rises through the trees from the child on the slope yonder. See, she lies on her back, uttering that strange wild sound, as primitive and soulless as the song of a bird. Some stornello endlessly repeated.

So she will go on, hour after hour, through the long lonely day that she spends on the hillside with her sheep. There is nothing personal in her song, it is scarcely distinctively human. Her consciousness is not thought, it knows nothing of before and after, but responds to the moods and motions of nature, like a bough that rustles to the tune of the wind. There are words, but they have little meaning for herself, except the *girala la ruota* of the eternal da capo. There is a different note in the *rispetti* of the older youths and maidens, those sweet love songs which rise and fall with melancholy, long drawn-out notes across the woods and fields. They have the same recurrent sound; the words are repeated, in transposed order, harping always on one thought or image; and like the stornelli, they express that sense of the great rhythms of nature which governs people who live always in contact with the earth. But there is also a poignant sadness in them, the protest of the individual, conscious of itself, against the tyranny of time and change, aware in the vivid sunshine of the alternation of the dark and of life moving unrelentingly towards death. Still deeper is the sense of sorrow in the mother's love song to her babe as she holds it against her breast. Instinctively she knows the need of consolation in the soul that is beginning its long pilgrimage. The inexpressible pathos of her voice invests the new-born creature with tragedy. It is only the *ninna-nanna* that she is singing, the simple lullaby with which the mothers consoled their infants in

Dante's days, and who knows how many thousands of years before. The gayer and more unreflecting a folk, the deeper seems this unconscious note of pain in their songs. The brightest moods cast the darkest shadows. This sadness does not utter itself articulately, in the words of the songs. The burden of the *rispetti* is always love. They breathe the sweet complaint of the lover, his longing and adoration; the loved one is likened to the fairest things of nature, her cheeks are the white and red of the flowers, of pomegranates, of rosy apples. The singer borrows a plume from the swallow wherewith to write her a letter, or sends her a message upon the wings of a dove. He would have roses and violets spring at the foot of her stair and orange trees embower her doorway with golden fruit and silver flowers. Sooner will he die than abandon her. Sometimes hate and jealousy inspire the verses, or the woe of abandonment, and the stornelli are often malicious and broadly satiric.

The wonderful beauty of flower and mountain and sky amid which they live seems to be reflected in the minds of these Tuscan peasants and to come out naturally in their folk-songs. The sense of rhythm and the poetic gift belong, I suppose, to the more primitive peoples. Song must have preceded speech, being a larger and more elemental expression, and still in the Casentino speech is half song. There is so little that is accidental or varied in the peasant's experience to change or break the phrasing of his utterances.

Listen to the cadence in it. What sound more musical than the call of one to another across the fields, or from hillside to hillside, loud, plaintive, insistent, with that fall at the end which carries it so far?

And to an onlooker at their religious ceremonies it seems as if the hill folk had kept, more whole than their brothers in the plains, that simple unquestioning faith, and meek devotion of the mediæval age, which found its highest expression in the altar-pieces of Fra Angelico and the bas-reliefs of Andrea della Robbia. Those veiled forms of women kneeling motionless before some image of Mary, a tawdry bespangled doll perhaps to us, but to them the symbol of help and consolation; those close-packed faces of innocent children and grave-eyed elders, gathered in the dimly-lighted church round the pulpit where the brown-gowned *fratino* stands and proclaims with sonorous voice and emphatic gesture the greatness and glory of the Church; the young girls and the rough-bearded men who kiss with so much tenderness of grief the poor wooden limbs of the *Gesù Morto* laid out amid candles and flowers in the church on Good Friday, are not these the outward and visible signs of a real emotion? Where life is all labour and has much hardship and sorrow, people cling to the old supports and to the hope of a better life which these poor images bring home to them. Sometimes of an autumn evening, when you are sitting within doors, you will catch a muffled beat of footsteps, a sound of low

intoning, and looking out of window will see moving below in the narrow street two long rows of lighted torches stretching far back, and be aware of black forms carrying them, with the white surpliced priest in the midst, reciting rapidly as he goes along. Some procession of penance on its way from the church to a wayside shrine or cross. These religious processions are very frequent in the mountains; you may see them often at twilight winding upon the hillside or along the Valley road, marked by the golden stars of their candles. None has so peculiarly touching and devout an effect as the ceremony of the 2nd of November, for the *Morti*. The day before, *Tutti Santi*, is the most festive occasion of the year, when even the poorest peasant eats meat, if at no other time, and there is general holiday and jollification. And nothing shows more the strange twinship between the joy of life and the thought of death in these people, than the sight of the whole population joining early next day in the celebration of the dead.

I remember, one 2nd of November, standing, between five and six o'clock in the morning, at a little distance from a village, beside a cross, where four roads meet, waiting for the procession to come by. The moon was fading over our heads in a rift of the pearly clouds, and the rose of dawn quickened in the south-east above the solemn hills. More than an hour earlier the bells had rung out from the church tower, dropping into the silence and darkness of the night

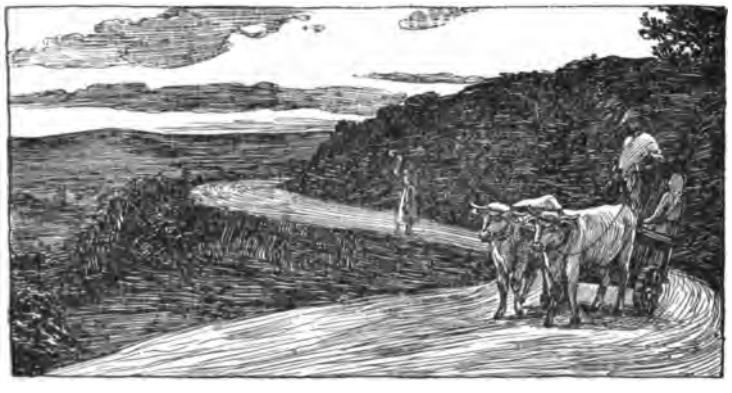
with a discordant clang, then ceasing and beginning again after an interval. So for five times they had rung, till the village was astir with dim figures. Now a long interval of silence had ensued, during which a service was going on in the church. Presently lights appear in the narrow street between the houses and stretch out in a double row along the road, advancing towards us. As the procession approaches we discern first the cross and banner, held aloft by a white-garbed member of some lay confraternity, then the women two by two, their heads kerchiefed and the better off wearing shawls, to protect them against the cold of the dawn. Each holds a torch and shelters the feeble flame with her other palm from the breeze that begins to stir. Young girls and children follow, and after them men and boys, behind the priest, who walks in the midst in his embroidered vestment, with a white-robed acolyte on his either side. The long train passes by and winds to the left, along the bare mountain road, to the little Campo Santo where the dead lie, on the steep slope of the hill, facing westwards. The sky behind the moving forms is now amethyst, and shapes begin to be distinguishable in the valley below. The procession passes up between the two solemn ranks of cypresses and enters in at the gate. Above the farther wall of the graveyard the eastern sky is glowing. How beautiful is the thought which prompts this reunion in spirit of the living with the dead at the moment when the gateway of the east is about to open to the glory of the sun!

Every little green mound within the enclosure is hung with a carefully-woven wreath of autumn flowers, and lighted candles are placed at head and foot and around as far as they will go; but many have only one little attenuated taper, tipped with a feeble heart-shaped flame. In this resting-place of the poor there are no headstones. But what need to carve the names in stone, when the record of them is thus traced out afresh year after year on the hearts of those left behind? Each family gathers round its own particular mound, kneeling, and the torches flame redder and less bright in the growing light of day. Some prostrate themselves over the grave, others weep with clasped hands; many of the older people have the lines of grief written enduringly on their wrinkled dry faces, and only a little deepened to-day. Many look indifferent; they are performing a rite which has lost for them its pang and its meaning.

Some laugh. These are gay figures such as those that dance in bas-relief upon the tombs in which their Latin ancestors long ago laid their dead. Do they not do well? To them death is but an episode of life, of the coming and the going; of the eternal antiphon which peasants and poets hear.

But even as one writes, change is making itself felt in the Valley Enclosed. We have already had a hint of it here and there. The mountain barriers will not shut it in much longer. Just as the river carries the waters

of the hillsides out through the gateway into the world beyond, so the streams of human life are beginning to find their way out in an ever-increasing flow. Ambitions awake and needs increase, work offers in the great cities, and the people go off and leave their homes and villages deserted. A young man with more energy than his neighbours gets work in some distant industrial centre ; his brothers follow him, and as soon as they can afford it they send for their *mama* and *babbo*, without whom the affectionate fellows cannot be happy. Other families from the same village follow their example. And the folk who once endured the winter cold uncomplainingly, and went barefoot and lived chiefly on polenta and water, those spare strong children of sun and air, who sang *rispetti* and danced, careless of the morrow, are now full of complaints of their lot and of longing for a different life. They are being drawn out by those laws of dynamics which govern men and rivers alike, into the great ocean of the world, and like the moisture which the sky sucks up from the sea and returns in rain to the mountains, they will come back perhaps some day, who knows how or when, to restore the river of life on their native hills.



ON THE CONSUMA

CHAPTER XII

FAREWELL TO THE VALLEY

"To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new."

THE ways by which the human streams may find their way out of the Valley Enclosed have been made broad and easy in these days. There is the little railway for those who would go Arezzo-wards, and one may get to Florence that way too, as the river does, round-about. But the quickest route, and the pleasantest in fine weather, between the Casentino and the lower valley of the Arno, is by the road over the Consuma Pass, through some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in Italy. You may enter the Valley or leave it, as you will, of course, by the Consuma, but the ascent is rather less arduous journeying towards Florence than in the contrary direction. Even then it is a slow

climb upwards for many a mile. The road branches off from the main highway of the Valley a short distance from Certomondo, on the Pratovecchio side, at a point where the chapel once stood in which Bishop Guglielmino is said to have been buried after the great battle. The traveller is in the very midst of the field of Campaldino there, and turns his steps from the Valley just at the scene of its most thrilling history. A little further on you cross the Arno, and looking up the stream catch sight of Romena's towers above the groves of poplars and willows ; on the left the water ripples away over the stones, always between silver clouds of foliage, to its meeting-place with the Solano a furlong or so below.

From here you ascend to Borgo alla Collina. This bit of the road is very interesting, not from any historic memories that I know of, but for the quaint things which one sees upon it. The steepness of the hill occasions much ingenuity in the Casentinese carters and waggoners. A *trapelo* is necessary, and one sees the strangest combination of beasts in consequence. Almost any creature, from a human being downwards, will be pressed into the service, regardless of incongruity. Huge waggoners' loads, piled mountain high upon a *baroccio*—a low two-wheeled kind of dray—go slowly up, drawn by three horses of unequal height and size harnessed abreast, with a donkey on one side of them, attached to the vehicle by a rope, and a pair of oxen fastened on in front, as the *trapelo*. They

are on their way to Florence ; the extra beasts will be taken off at the end of the long ascent to Consuma, and the rest of the equipage will travel on slowly through the night along the mountain road, often on the edge of precipitous slopes, the waggoners asleep upon the top of the loads and the horses of their own accord pulling to one side when a rare vehicle is encountered from the opposite direction. Sometimes it is a contadino's "flitting" that one meets on the hill ; a miscellaneous collection of household goods heaped upon a little cart, and all the innocent-eyed, smiling women and children of the family atop, while one poor little donkey struggles up beneath the load, a spectacle picturesque but pitiful. One must shut one's eyes to the woes of the ass, if one would be quite happy in the Casentino. But the peasants are by no means always unkind to their beasts. The oxen are as a rule very well cared for, and if they expect much of the ass, many of them do not spare themselves. I remember seeing upon this same hill a load even more mountainous than usual, to which an unusually tiny donkey was harnessed. But beside the donkey was a strong contadino, pulling with all his might at a rope attached to the cart ; three men were pushing behind the wheels, and a fourth at the back, their bodies at an acute angle with the road. The strange thing was that a big, strong, comfortable-looking horse was tied on behind and was stepping along at his ease. But remembering the experience of Master Cobblers-awl in

Heaven, I forbore to reproach the peasants for their folly, but waited, expecting to see the horse spread wings and carry the whole concern to the top of the hill. Italy, however, is not Heaven. Nothing of the sort happened, and I watched the patient figures toiling up till they disappeared over the brow. In this country human beings are not ashamed to drag burdens. It is not uncommon to see a man in the shafts, with a donkey in front as leader, and a friend of mine vows that she has seen a woman and an ox drawing a plough together.

The traveller himself in his *vettura* will be drawn briskly up the hill by the willing nervy little horses generally used in the Casentino, pranked out in bells and feathers. At the top the driver will start them into a gallop, and thunder beneath the deep gateway and through the narrow street of Borgo alla Collina, with a stupendous cracking of the whip and clatter of hoofs upon the cobblestones, scattering children, geese, hens, donkeys, and all the miscellaneous *roba* that encumbers the way, and so out into the bare road beyond, all in the twinkling of an eye. Not that he is in any hurry to get to the end of his journey, but because he loves to make a brave appearance among his fellow-men.

Soon after Borgo the road begins to mount up and up the hillside, overlooking the western valleys. You have turned your back on the main Valley and it is soon hidden. But it will reappear again and again to

the Lot's wife that most visitors make of themselves when saying farewell to this enchanting region. You are skirting the upper part of the Arno valley, though on the west side of the hill, and presently as you get higher the towers of Romena suddenly rise up over the ridge on the right. Further on the Badiola appears, an ancient church upon a little rise marked by a group of trees, a familiar landmark from the hillsides above Stia. The Badiola has historic associations. From time immemorial the traffic between Florence and the Casentino has passed over the Consuma, and the old track, though much shorter and less winding, followed the same direction as the present road. It was by this way that the great Florentine host in all the bravery of war, with its sixteen hundred gaily-caparisoned cavaliers, among whom rode the young Dante Alighieri, crossed the mountains to victory in 1289. They are said to have encamped at the Badiola on their way.

The sight of Romena brings with it another and more sinister Dantesque reminder. There is a lonely farm which you come to upon the road, a mile or two further on. It stands in a bleak desolate spot high up, where the woods do not reach. A few bare knotted poles of trees rise up in front of it. It is called *Uom Morto*, or *Omomorto*—the Dead Man. If you climb up behind the house you come upon the traces of the old road, and following it back for about a mile, to a point where another track diverges in the direction of Stia, you will find a heap of stones, the *Macia dell'*

Uom Morto—the Dead Man's Cairn. This rough monument is said to mark the spot where a criminal once suffered death. The heap has grown up from the custom followed by every passer-by of throwing a stone there, out of compassion or some religious feeling, or perhaps with a superstitious idea of warding off evil fortune. The Dead Man, thus memorialised upon the solitary mountain, has found another immortality. He was none other apparently than Maestro Adamo, the false coiner of Romena. Cristoforo Landino tells us in his Commentary on the *Divine Comedy* that Maestro Adamo "*was burnt opposite Romena on the old road from Borgo alla Collina where a heap of stones is still to be seen to-day, and the peasants, who live about there now, affirm that their grandfathers had heard from their old people before them that it was so.*" Landino it must be remembered was living within one hundred and fifty years of the event.

Here then died the miserable wretch who had forged the sacred seal of the Baptist. And the last sight which mocked his eyes through the flames, to be carried with him to Hell in eternal remembrance, was the evil towers of Romena where the Counts, his masters, had induced him to do the deed.

"Ivi è Romena, là dov' io falsai
la lega sigillata del Batista
.
Ma s' io vedessi qui l'anima trista
di Guido o d' Alessandro o di lor frate
per fonte Branda non darei la vista."

Farewell to the Valley

The towers such as they are to-day, stricken by time and shadowed by the ill fame of their ancient masters, stand up stark upon the hill-top still, facing the place of death.

This is our last glimpse of them. We have now completely turned away from the Valley, though glimpses of it still are seen behind. Romena is not the final impression of the Casentino which we shall carry away. The worst of the ascent is now done. The road passes along a bare mountain ridge, wild, treeless, and strewn with rocks and boulders. On the left you look across to the Pratomagno, with its mighty ribs robed in heavy purple and overlaid in June with the gold of the broom, in December with snow. Behind you, between the intervening shoulders of the nearer hills, the Valley still appears, smiling and radiant, far-off, an enchanted land, Poppi beautiful in the midst, La Verna high over all. But the vision of it becomes more and more obstructed. The road turns and it is lost, and again with another turn it reappears, each time more blue, more visionary, a land of dreams, sinking away from us. Now Poppi is gone; only La Verna remains, greeting the eyes anew when one thought it was lost for good.

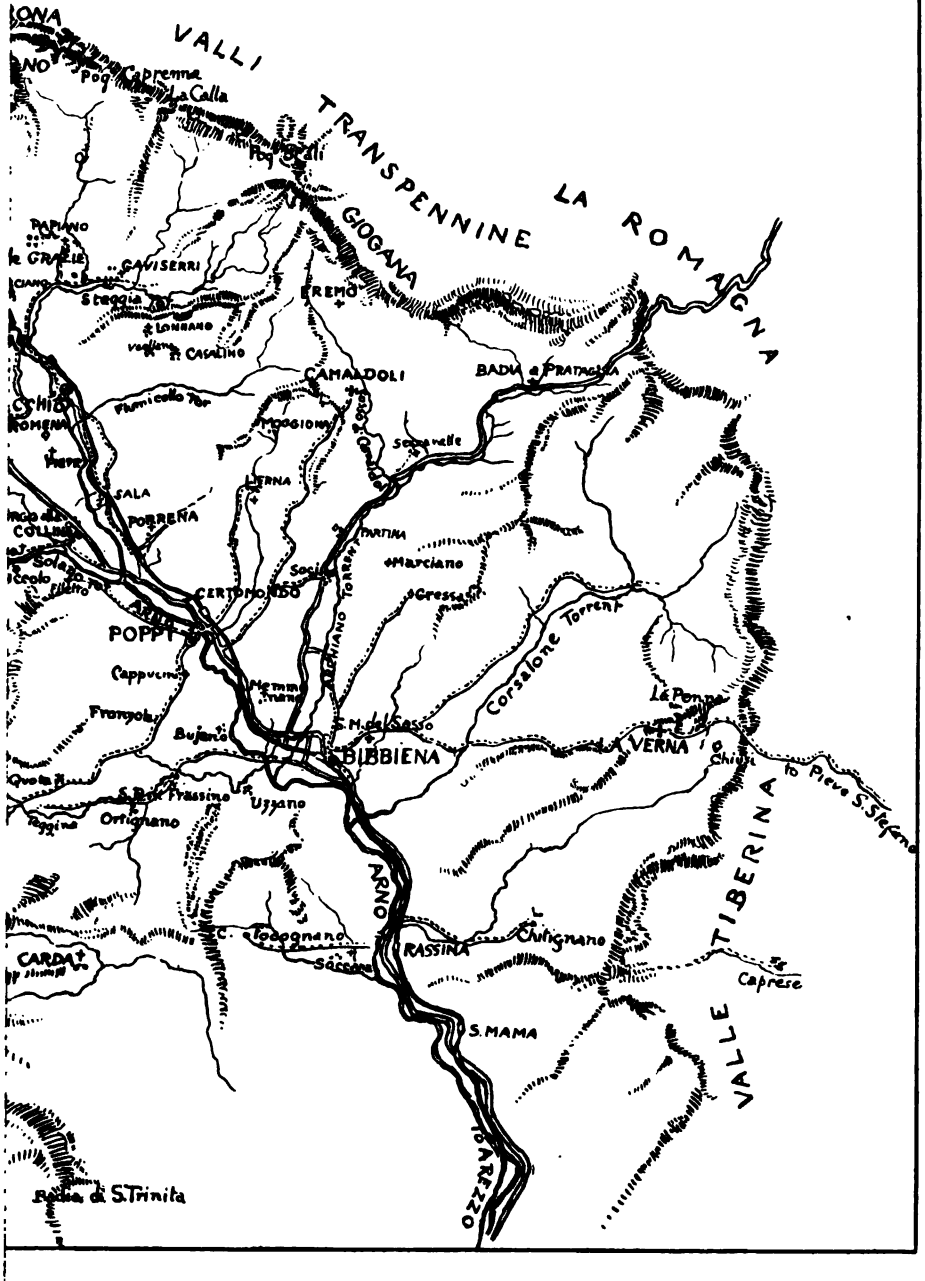
When the village of Consuma, bleak and straggling upon the bare ridge, is reached and passed, you feel that now indeed the last farewell to the Valley has been said. But no! Suddenly the sad desolate hills open for one moment, and there, shining upon the mountains, infinitely far off, is La Verna, sending across its

message for the last time. A flash, and it is gone. The Casentino has sunk out of sight.

After passing Borselli, a tiny wayside hamlet about three miles beyond Consuma, the road descends gradually into the Val d'Arno. Distant views open before the traveller, faint and blue. The lower course of the river, which we have so lately left in its infancy behind us, is now visible in front, with the mountain ranges rolling back from it on either side, like the waves of the Red Sea piled up for the passage of the Chosen People. There, opposite, is the suave line of hills crowned by the pines around the Dominican Convent of the Incontro, and far away to the right appear the summits of the Pistoiese alps, which for a considerable part of the year show golden snows against the blue of the sky. The face of the country changes as one rapidly descends. At Diacceto the valley begins to open below and the river is seen sweeping on its way. How different from the shallow, rippling young stream of the Casentino, but newly freed from the mountain caves! Here it is broad and quiet and strong, like one that has lost the hurry and excitement of youth, but knows now its way and its end. And what a different world it flows through from the region of its birth! The landscape smiles, gentle, serene, immense, beneath the wide blue sky, and the caress of the grey-green olives is upon all the soft slopes, the tree so clear, so delicate, so Florentine. You feel that the City of Flowers is not far off. Not even a ruined tower is

here to break with the thought of the angry past the peace which the olive symbolises. The wild and sterile Apennines are left far behind. Only the shoulder of the Pratomagno, sharply peaked on winter days with snow, still rises mountainous and frowning, on the left, patched high up with the dark forests of Vallombrosa, to remind one still of Alpine regions and Etrurian shades.

CASENTINO


VALLI
TRANSPENNINE
GIOGANA
LA ROMAGNA
Poggio Capretta
La Calla
POPIANO
le GRAZIE
CAVISERRI
Staggia
LONNANO
Il CASALINO
FREMO
CAMALDOLI
BADIA a PRATACCIA
Fiumicello
MOGGIONA
Sorgente
SALA
PORRENA
TERNA
Socana
TORRENTE TARLANA
Marciano
CERTOMONDO
Gressa
POPPI
Cappuccini
Memmiano
Frangola
Bujano
M. del Sasso
BIBBIENA
LA VERNA
Le Ponte
Chiusi
Pieve S. Stefano
Uzzano
Ortignano
ARNO
Toppogna
CARDA
RASSINA
Chitignano
Caprese
S. MAMA
VALLE TIBERINA
TORRENTE OZZERE
Badia di S. Trinita

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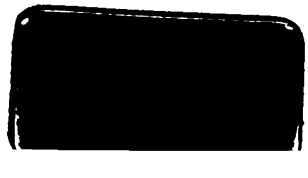
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